

# *Shenandoah*

THE WASHINGTON AND LEE UNIVERSITY REVIEW

Vol. XIII, No. 2

Winter, 1962

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## A SYMPOSIUM ON ROBERT GRAVES ESSAYS

W. H. AUDEN

THOM GUNN

G. S. FRASER

D. J. ENRIGHT

DONALD DAVIE

ALAN SILLITOE

COLIN WILSON

## POETRY

PHILIP LARKIN

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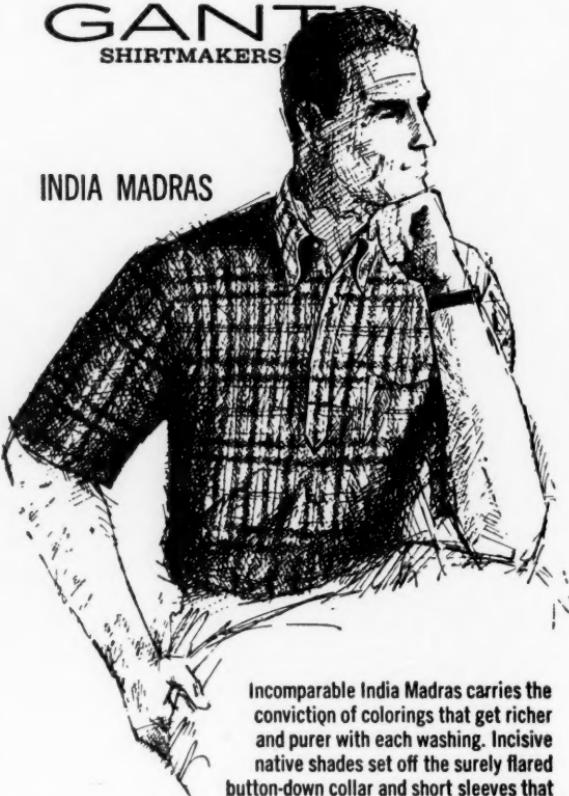
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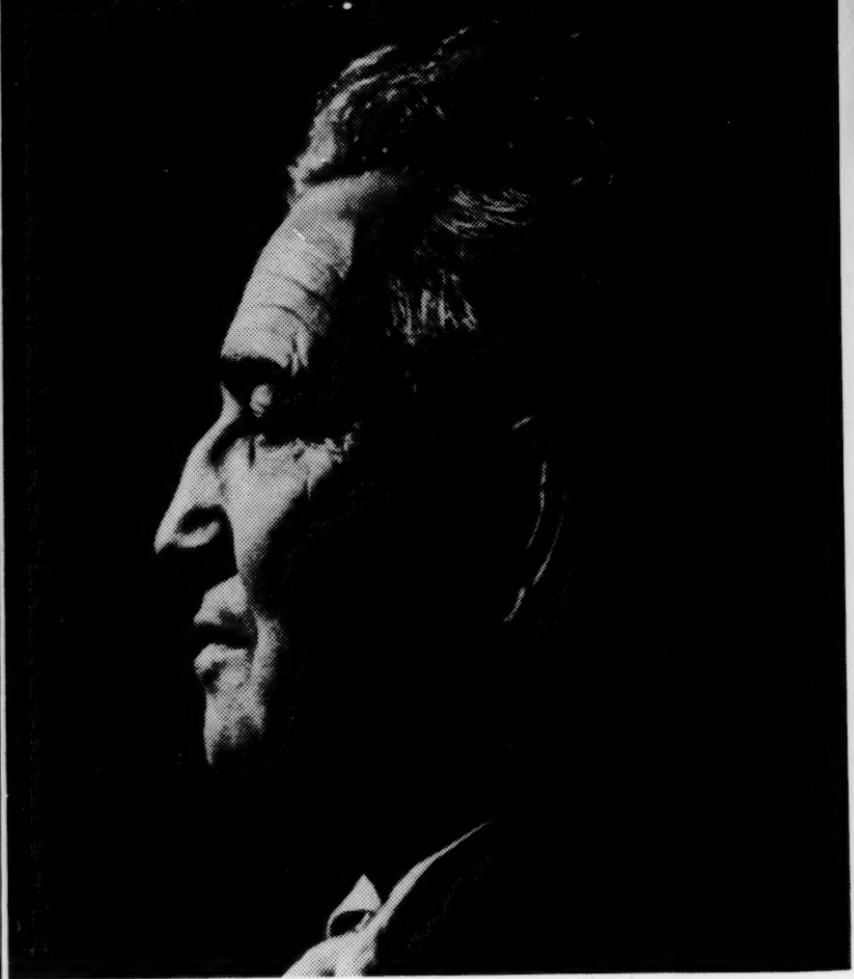
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ROBERT GRAVES

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## INTRODUCTORY NOTE

Except for a few pioneer essays and a couple of brief pamphlets about him, Robert Graves has for many years gone without anything like the recognition due him as one of England's greatest (an adjective which Graves despises) living poets. This issue of *Shenandoah* represents an attempt to provide his rapidly growing audience with a number of articles, by leading critics and poets, which should do something to establish him in the high position he has merited for so long. We have done this not for his sake—he has always been rather contemptuous of his critics, and has consistently derided any such attempts to "place" him—but for our own sakes. He may not need the friendship of the critics, but we need to know him far better than we do. With all apologies to Robert Graves, then, we herewith offer this symposium to all who might wish to know something more about England's leading poet.

DOUGLAS DAY



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# Shenandoah

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W. H. Auden

## A POET OF HONOR

I first came across Robert Graves's poems in the volumes of *Georgian Poetry* when I was a schoolboy, and ever since he has been one of the very few poets whose volumes I have always bought the moment they appeared. There were many others, no doubt, who did the same, but, until recently, Mr. Graves was not a Public Name in the way that Mr. Eliot, for example, was. Individuals who had discovered his poetry for themselves would talk about it to each other, but his name was not bandied about at cocktail parties to show that the speaker was *au courant*, nor was he made the subject of critical articles in little magazines or of Ph.D. theses.

But now the situation has changed.

... though the Otherwhereish currency  
Cannot be quoted yet officially,  
I meet less hindrance now with the exchange  
Nor is my garb, even, considered strange;  
And shy enquiries for literature  
Come in by every post, and the side door.

wrote Mr. Graves a few years ago, and already the first two lines are out of date. I do not know whether to be glad or sorry about this. One is always glad when a writer one has long admired gains wide recognition—publicity at least means bigger sales—but public fame has its dangers, not so much for the poet himself, particularly if he has Mr. Graves's years and strength of character, as for his public. With his consent or without it, he becomes responsible for a fashion and, though some fashions may be better than others, in all there is an element of falsehood. No poet has been

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more concerned than Mr. Graves with poetic integrity, with being true, at all costs, to his real self. The difficulty is that it is precisely the man who is most obviously himself who can be the greatest threat to those who have not yet found themselves, for instead of taking him as an *example*, inspiring them to do in their way what he has done in his, they are all too apt to take him as a *model* whose style of writing and literary tastes they blindly follow.

As an example, nothing could be more admirable than the way in which at a time when most of his seniors and juniors were looking to the French poets of the post-Baudelaireian period or to the English metaphysicals for their poetic models, Mr. Graves had the courage to ignore them and remain faithful to his personal preferences—nursery rhymes, ballads, Skelton, Caroline poets like Lovelace and Rochester, even romantic poets like Blake, Coleridge, and Christina Rossetti—or that, in the age obsessed with experiment and innovation in meter and poetic organization, he should have gone on quietly writing genuine contemporary poetry within the traditional forms. It would not be equally admirable, however, if Pope and free verse, say, were to become taboo because Mr. Graves does not like the one or write in the other. But to turn to his poems themselves is enough to make one forget all such gloomy forebodings.

The kind of critic who regards authors as an opportunity for displaying his own brilliance and ingenuity will find Mr. Graves a poor subject. A few of his poems, it is true, can benefit from a gloss, but this Mr. Graves has provided himself in *The White Goddess*. For the rest, though he happens to be a learned scholar, he demands no scholarship of his readers; his poems are short, their diction simple, their syntax unambiguous and their concerns, love, nature, the personal life, matters with which all are familiar and in which all are interested. About public life, politics, the world situation, etc., he has nothing to say.

This does not mean that he regards public events as of no significance—he could never have written his excellent historical novels if he did—only that it is not a realm with which he believes poetry should be concerned. He also believes, I suspect, that in our age the Public Realm is irredeemable and that the only thing a sensible man can do is ignore it and live as decently as he can in

spite of it. I can picture Mr. Graves, under certain circumstances, as a guerilla fighter, but I cannot see him writing pamphlets for any cause.

Like nearly all writers worth reading, Mr. Graves is a moralist, and the artistic merits of his poems cannot be divorced from the conception of the good life which they express. Though Horace is one of his favorite poets—Horace is unpassionate and easygoing, Graves passionate and puritanical—they both attach great importance to measure and good sense, and have a common dislike for willful disorder and theatrical gestures. If Mr. Graves is the more convincing advocate, it is because one feels that measure and good sense are values he has had to fight to achieve. It is hard to believe that Horace ever suffered from nightmares or some passion so violent that it could have destroyed him, but he would have approved, I think, of Graves's description of the climate of thought.

*Wind, sometimes, in the evening chimneys; rain  
On the early morning roof, on sleepy sight;  
Snow streaked upon the hilltop, feeding  
The fond brook at the valley-head  
That greens the valley and that parts the lips;  
The sun, simple, like a country neighbor;  
The moon, grand, not fanciful with clouds.*

Graves's good man, leaving aside the special case of the good poet, is somebody who leads an orderly, hard-working, independent life, a good husband and father who keeps his word and pays his debts, outwardly, in fact, a good bourgeois, but inwardly never losing his sense of his personal identity or his capacity for love and reverence.

On the subject of love, no poet in our time has written more or better. Most of Hardy's love poems are elegies, most of Yeats's are concerned with unrequited love, but Graves's deal with the joys and griefs of mutual passion. He shares with D. H. Lawrence a contempt for those who would deny the physical element in love and call

*... for a chaste  
Sodality: all dead below the waist.*

but that is the only point on which they agree. He has none of

Lawrence's hysterical aversion to conscious understanding between the sexes; on the contrary, any sexual relationship that does not lead to personal understanding and affection is, for him, base. Nothing could be further from Lawrence than his priapic poem *Down, Wanton Down!* In this, as in many others, he shows his distaste for the vulgarity and crudeness of untamed male sexuality. Woman, to Graves, is the superior sex, and only a woman can teach a man the meaning of true love.

For the poet, as the messenger of the Mother Goddess, there is an additional obligation to speak no more and no less than the truth, and each poet, according to his nature and the time in which he lives, has his own kind of temptation to lie. Mr. Graves has told us of his. He was born—the term is inaccurate but convenient—with a natural faculty for writing verse. Ask him to improvise a poem on any subject, and in ten minutes he can turn out something competent and mellifluous. This is a very valuable gift, and a poet like Wordsworth who lacks it is deficient, but it is a dangerous one, for the poet who possesses it can all too easily forsake the truth for verbal display.

*But you know, I know, and you know I know  
My principal curse:  
Shame at the mounting dues I have come to owe  
A devil of verse,  
Who caught me young, ingenuous and uncouth,  
Prompting me how  
To evade the patent clumsiness of truth—  
Which I do now.*

It is of this devil and not of another poet, I think that Graves is speaking in *In Broken Images*.

*He is quick, thinking in clear images;  
I am slow, thinking in broken images.  
He becomes dull, trusting to his clear images;  
I become sharp, mistrusting my broken images....  
He in a new confusion of his understanding;  
I in a new understanding of my confusion.*

A comparison between his individual volumes and the *Collected Poems* which follow it, and then between the successive *Collected Poems* of 1926, 1938, 1947, 1955 and 1961 reveals how stern with himself Mr. Graves has been in discarding any poems

that contained a trace of smartness. Among them, I remember a pastiche of *Speke Parrot*, which was an amazing tour de force. Personally, I regret its omission, but I can see why it has been excluded. The only virtuoso pieces he has retained are comic poems like *Welcome to the Caves of Arta* and *Apollo of the Physiologists*, for a comic poem must almost necessarily be a virtuoso performance. If I have a greater fondness for bravura in poetry than Mr. Graves, I suspect that we only differ in our notion of what is comic or what may be comically treated. To me, for example, *Lycidas* is a "comic" poem which I can learn "by heart not rote" as I can learn a poem of Edward Lear. It seems to me a verbal arcadia in which death, grief, religion, and politics are games which cannot possibly be taken seriously. On the other hand, because I am convinced of the reality of their emotions, there are religious sonnets by Donne and Hopkins in which I feel that the virtuosity of expression comes between them and the truth.

Mr. Graves's other temptation has been the tendency of the romantic imagination to regard the extraordinary and remote as more "poetic," more luminous than everyday events.

*The lost, the freakish, the unspelt  
Drew me: for simple sights I had no eye.  
And I did swear allegiance then  
To wildness, not (as I thought) to truth—  
Become a virtuoso, and this also,  
Later, of simple sights, when tiring  
Of unicorn and upas?*

Again, a reading of his collected poems will show how successful he has been in disciplining his imagination and his tongue. Occasionally, perhaps, he indulges his subjective feelings at the expense of objective fact. Among his more recent poems is one entitled "Turn of the Moon" which concludes as follows:

*But if one night she brings us, as she turns  
Soft, steady, even, copious rain  
That harms no leaf or flower, but gently falls  
Hour after hour, sinking to the taproots,  
And the sodden earth exhales at dawn  
A long sigh scented with pure gratitude,  
Such rain—the first rain of our lives, it seems,*

*Neither foretold, cajoled, nor counted on—  
Is woman giving as she loves.*

The lines are beautiful and, at first reading, I was carried away, but, then, a tiresome doubt obtruded itself: "Are drought and rainfall *really* caused by the moon? What would a meteorologist say?"

In addition to discarding many poems, Mr. Graves has revised some, and, to anyone who writes verses himself, nothing is more instructive than a poet's revisions.

In Mr. Graves's case, they are particularly important because they prevent his doctrine of the subordination of art to truth from being misunderstood. It is all right for him to say

*And call the man a liar who says I wrote  
All that I wrote in love, for love of art.*

But we all know the kind of poet who, when one points out to him that a certain line is obscure or clumsy and should be re-written, replies: "But that is how it came to me." Art without love is nothing, but love without art is insufficient. Here for comparison are two verses of *The Sea Horse*.

*Tenderly confide your secret love,  
For one who never pledged you less than love,  
To this indomitable hippocamp,  
Child of your element, coiled a-ramp,  
Having ridden out worse tempests than you know of:  
Make much of him in your despair, and shed  
Salt tears to bathe his taciturn dry head.*

(1953)

*Since now in every public place  
Lurk phantoms who assume your walk and face,  
You cannot yet have utterly abjured me  
Nor stifled the insistent roar of sea.*

*Do as I do: confide your unquiet love  
(For one who never owed you less than love)  
To this indomitable hippocamp,  
Child of your elements, coiled a-ramp,  
Having ridden out worse tempests than you know of;  
Under his horny ribs a blood-red stain  
Portends renewal of our pain.*

*Sweetheart, make much of him and shed  
Tears on his taciturn dry head.*

(1961)

Only a craftsman as meticulous as Mr. Graves can afford to speak lightly of his art.

To read his poems is both a joy and a privilege; they are passionate, truthful, and well-bred.

D.  
T  
Geoffrey Hill

*A Pre-Raphaelite Notebook*

Primroses; salutations; the miry skull  
Of a half-eaten ram; viscous wounds in earth  
Opening. What seraphs are afoot!

Gold seraph to gold worm in the pierced slime:  
Greetings. Advent of power-in-grace. *The power  
Of flies distracts the working of our souls.*<sup>1</sup>

Earth's abundance: the God-ejected Word  
Resorts to flesh, procures carrion, satisfies  
Its white hunger. Salvation's travesty

A deathless metaphor: the stale head  
Sauced in original blood; the little feast  
Foaming with cries of rapture and despair.

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<sup>1</sup>Adapted from Pascal.

D. J. Enright

## THE EXAMPLE OF ROBERT GRAVES

The great movement which we call 'Modernism' has ended. As a really vital force it ended some while ago. During the last twenty years we have witnessed its dying spasms, in a series of willed exhibitions of greater or lesser puerility, so that in the 1960's one would not have been particularly surprised to find Dadaism invoked as the latest thing. In fact the current neo-Poundianism doesn't seem to me much of an improvement on that.

All movements end, for otherwise there would be no movement. It is no reflection on a movement to say that sooner or later it must end; nor to remark that, once a movement has ended, it soon becomes remote from the life of the time and the time's artistic needs or possibilities. No doubt there is more than one reason why Modernism hasn't come to *seem* remote; but one reason is the fact that nothing very exciting has succeeded it.

The trouble is, if you talk like this, you will be accused of behaving as if Eliot and Pound had never existed. You will be charged with the serious offence of jumping over these poets. It would take a remarkable athlete to do this! To me it seems more a question of attempting to get round the Chinese Wall of *The Waste Land* and the *Cantos*—to get round it, not because one expects to 'go forward' but merely because one would like to go somewhere.

After all, Eliot and (surely!) Pound have long been installed in the Pantheon. And surely we may be forgiven for reading them critically now, with reservations, even with misgivings? There is not necessarily any conceit or arrogance in that. Cannot a cat occasionally look away from a king?

It would certainly be easier to discuss 'turning away' from Modernism if we had something more impressive to point to by way of new and positive achievement, some sort of *Lyrical Ballads*. Some of the younger British poets, those who began to

publish in the 1950's, have found such a positive achievement, not in themselves, but in an old poet, who was neither modernist nor 'traditional,' neither revolutionary nor reactionary.

Robert Graves had gone on writing—not as if Eliot and Pound had never existed—but as if other poets had existed in the past and as if other poets might still come to exist. He was the living refutation of that literary-fascist dogma, 'Read, and Write Likewise,' as preached by senile modernists, the new generation of old academics, and the other passengers who crowded into the last coach of the band wagon.

He was also a striking exception to the rule of gang movements and coteries which had prevailed for so long. Whatever the decade of the 1950's needed, it did not need more gangs or more manifestos. Perhaps the best the decade could hope for was some modest, decent poetry. (No doubt it would rather have had *great* poetry, but there are times when great poetry doesn't come. Whereas pretentious poetry is never in short supply.) The 'Movement' of the 1950's, as featured in the anthology *New Lines*, was held together chiefly by a dislike for Apocalyptic writing, just as the *Mavericks* group was held together chiefly by a dislike for the *New Lines* group—or, perhaps, for the idea that any group of poets should arrogate to themselves the adjective 'new.' Judging by the cold cavilling with which *New Lines* was received, and the even colder silence which met the opposition *Mavericks*, it must be supposed that no one had much faith in the validity of movements at that point. Even the contributors to *New Lines* didn't seem especially enthusiastic about their association. It was, at any rate, a very loose one.

And there, all the while, was Graves. Who had kept out of any sort of communal or committee movement, and not through prudence but on principle, a quiet unaggressive principle. He wasn't sulking in his tent; he had gone on writing and publishing.

The diehards, old and young, won't see the point, though. Only a few years ago someone was reproaching Graves for his 'inordinate self-consciousness.' But 'inordinate' according to what law? One suspects, according to the critic's interpretation of Eliot's theory of impersonality or 'process of depersonalization,' expounded forty years back. The same critic attributed Graves's lack of a

sense of proportion (evinced, it seems, in the poet's assumption that his poems were worth forewords, or worth revising) to 'his isolation from contemporary literary theory and practice.' Well, when one compares the work actually *done* by Graves with the productions of poets who have obviously not isolated themselves from 'contemporary literary theory,' one can only wonder whether such an isolation was really a disaster. Where the arts are concerned, the only absolute law is: Nothing succeeds like success. By-laws can then be deduced from someone's success, but they remain valid only in certain places and only for a certain time. And it is hard to understand how Graves can be said to have isolated himself from contemporary literary *practice*, seeing that he is one of the few contemporary poets who have gone on practicing.

The predominant characteristic of our 'contemporary literary practice' would seem to be its fearful subjection to theory, the glum self-consciousness and deliberateness under which it labours, which by a sad irony arose out of Eliot's theory of impersonality, just as his gibe (then timely) at the exhortation to 'look in thy heart, and write' appears to have encouraged a mechanistic theory of composition. All of which—though very sad, and not as things ought to be—is very much how things are. And 'the historical sense' ought to have taught us *that*, at least.

In short, while others were being conscious about poetry and how it ought to be written at the given time, Graves was writing it—a poetry with guts and brain, elegance and acerbity, sophistication and substance—even though he had to look in his heart from time to time in the doing of it.

I suppose this is what he chiefly exemplifies for us: the poet as a free individual, free from party, free from theory, free to try to find himself, by trial and error and success—and constant effort.

D. J. Enright

### *The Hard Core*

You can find them anywhere.  
In better managed states, you'll have to look:  
They're there, unadvertised behind the hoardings,  
In casual self-concealing tenements,  
Asleep by public fountains.  
In badly managed states, they walk the streets  
Free citizens, free to beg.

One is a drug addict. Another armless.  
One is spoiled by rheumatism (from working  
long hours on bridges or public fountains).  
Some were born too weak to keep their strength up.  
The commoner suffer merely from consumption,  
And dysentery, and child-bearing, and anaemia.  
Nothing, it seems, can dissolve this hard core  
Of disorder and disease.

The anarchist moves among them delicately  
(Despite his age), with cast-off bread and  
Clothing, small change and opium dottles,  
Little gifts for his admirers  
(As they would be, if they knew, if they'd had  
The chance to know.) They prove his point,  
Without once opening their surly mouths.  
They are the only people who count.

He counts them.  
Sometimes wondering, as he washes his hands  
At a public fountain: Is he sorry?  
Is he an anarchist because he is sorry?  
Is he sorry because he's an anarchist?  
Grateful, at last, when one of them spits  
In his face. Breaking a law.

D. J. Enright

*Campus in Vacation: Singapore*

The children of peons and labourers  
Tell tales on the Library steps, or chase  
Gently through dim Administrative channels.  
Students walk hand in hand, unacademic boy  
and girl,  
Between the silent halls. Now is not the season  
For the great performances.

Even the palms are idle, leaves propped together  
like harmless drunks.  
It is hot; even at night it is hot;  
The strollers look at the moon for a moment's coolness,  
A cool assurance that everything changes,  
And most things stay the same.

But peace and quiet are of small service to the State.  
'Scandalous,' declares Authority, 'that all  
This valuable scientific equipment should lie idle  
For months on end!' Voice of our scholarly conscience,  
and our salary.

All this equipment, all this valuable equipment.  
The servants' children hide behind fat trees,  
The strolling couples unlock their hands,  
Seeing a professor address himself to a laboratory,  
Firm, valuable, modest, head down, brain up.  
He unlocks the door, he unlocks the scientific equipment,  
Thinking with gentle scorn of the arts teachers  
Lying idle in air-conditioned bedrooms, dreaming  
artistic seductions.

What else will he unlock? What new ground open up?  
He gazes through me, panting past his window, after  
My unbalanced daughter on her birthday bicycle.

I stick my tongue out. What odds,  
Whether the couples walk on the campus and look at  
The moon or walk on the moon and look at the earth?  
Just so long as there's somewhere left to walk,  
    to sit, to cycle,  
And something left to look at.

G. S. Fraser

## THE REPUTATION OF ROBERT GRAVES

1

The struggle for the Professorship of Poetry at Oxford has, over the last ten years or so, been a symptom of how the wider struggle is going on between the various sources and centres of literary authority in England. The Professor's pay is small and his duties consist in being in residence and giving some lectures during one term of each year during his five years' term of office. His prestige, however, is or can be very great. Before the recent election of Robert Graves to this office, his two immediate forerunners were C. Day Lewis and W. H. Auden. Both of these were, in a way, daring and unexpected choices. They are both still, in spite of all their change and development since these days, thought of by many people in England as essentially dangerous young revolutionaries of the 1930s; on the other hand, it was the loyalty of many middle-aged Oxford graduates to memories of Spain, Ethiopia, the anti-Fascist struggle that Dr. Enid Starkie, who canvassed warmly for each poet in the successive elections, was able to whip up. C. S. Lewis, who was put up against C. Day Lewis, stood, in a sense, for Christian conservatism, and perhaps for the idea that the Professor of Poetry should be primarily a scholar rather than a poet.

Auden's election came up against the difficulties that many people still disliked him in England for having spent the years of the Second World War in the United States and for having become an American citizen. Dr. Starkie's canvassing, as well as Auden's gifts and reputation, again carried the day. But Dr. Starkie did not canvass for Graves; instead, she ran against him. There were two further candidates. Miss Helen Gardner, who has written what I think the best short book about T. S. Eliot, and who teaches English at Oxford, is certainly no enemy of modern poetry. I suppose she may have felt that Graves's criticism is irresponsible (I am sure she must admire his poetry). The other candidate was Dr. F. R. Leavis, of Cambridge, who, where Miss

Gardner stands for a combination of criticism and scholarship, stands for pure criticism based on standards of strict moral discrimination. Graves had, therefore, roughly what one might call the poetic Left, the Christian conservative Right, and the agnostic puritan Centre against him. His election (all Oxford graduates may vote) was therefore a striking tribute to the excellence of his poetry and the attractiveness of his personality. It was also an ironic crowning honour for a poet who has never concealed his dislike either for the official literary or official academic worlds, who since 1928 has spent most of his working life out of England, and who has always been a mocker of what is today called the Establishment.

I do not know what sort of lectures Dr. Starkie would have given (she is a student of French rather than English literature) but Miss Gardner's lectures would certainly have been measured and scholarly performances; Dr. F. R. Leavis is, with Mr. T. S. Eliot, one of our two most distinguished living English critics, he has devoted most of his critical attention in recent years to the novel, and it would have been a privilege to hear him going back to poetry, and perhaps revising and qualifying, or enlarging upon, critical points he had previously made. Graves is a distinguished critic himself, but his Clark Lectures at Cambridge some years ago suggested that he had become set in his opinions, and that all he is likely to do at Oxford is to repeat things he has said already, to repeat them, no doubt, in an amusing and provocative way. He is also, people who heard his Clark Lectures say, not a very good lecturer; he writes crisp scripts, but delivers them in a rather dry, flat, old-fashioned officer's and gentleman's voice that robs the matter of its proper resonance among the audience.

His critical likes and dislikes are, perhaps, mainly important for the light they throw on his own poetic practice. So some brief account of them is perhaps here in order. Graves does not use the word but he stands, I think, as much as Pound and Eliot, for an idea of tradition; *his* tradition is a quite different one from theirs, but it is by no means based on shallower learning or more cursory reading. It is based on a fundamental difference of attitude and temperament, and perhaps of national background. Graves could claim, I think, to be our most distinguished living poet in

a specifically English tradition, a tradition, however, which reaches back to the classical world. He is primarily a lyrical poet (the poem, as such, for him is essentially the short lyric), and primarily a poet in a romantic tradition; but the lyrical and romantic impulses are curbed, or held in, by a temperamental dryness, surliness, or melancholy, and surveyed and corrected by an ironic wit; a sense of classical form, learned particularly from the study of Latin amorous and elegiac poets, also prevents Graves from ever indulging in the typical romantic vice of diffuseness; he is often, however, an odd, quaint, and grotesque poet, as some of the minor romantics in particular were. In some ways, in his concentration on the theme of love, his combination of lyricism and irony, of a rather old-fashioned, sometime romantic diction with sharp colloquial humour, he resembles Yeats. His view of life could be called, like Yeats's or like certain important aspects of Yeats's view of life, pagan, earthy, tragic, heroic, aristocratic. Yet Yeats is one of the modern poets whom he most bitterly dislikes; not, I think, out of jealousy (though a good judge once suggested to me that this might be so) but because he finds in Yeats something theatrical. Yeats believed that poetry should be chanted or intoned; Graves believes that it should be read out in a dry, flat, natural voice. He hates poetry that calls attention to the fact that it is a "literature," hates any hint of pomposness in poetry; he has written some extremely sad and frightening poems (some of these are among his most powerful) but perhaps no poem in which there is not some hint of humour or at least of dry self-deprecation.

He sees the poet as a humble man, making an offering out of love; the offering is never worthy, in itself, but the spirit of humility and love behind it may make it acceptable to the Muse. The idea of the poet as a great man, or the cult of the great poem, he will have nothing to do with. Yeats's arrogance, his consciousness of greatness, must therefore be abhorrent to Graves. I once met a poet who has some qualities in common with Graves, Canon Andrew Young, and asked him what he had thought of Yeats when he met him. Young said: "I did not like him. He was a proud man." Yeats who wrote about Parnell, "For a proud man's a lovely man," would have been utterly puzzled. Yeats also thought of himself, rightly, as a great artist; for Graves, poems are written

out of love, not out of love of art. Poetry is serious because it is our most laborious and exact way of trying to tell the truth. He hates philosophers on the whole, but he might well agree with the late Professor J. L. Austin: "Importance is not important: truth is."

## 2

Graves recently published in a periodical called X an article called "November 5th Address." It purports to be the script of a lecture delivered in London in 1928 but there is something odd about the footnote: "Apparently given in 1928 to the Teachers' Union in London, but I cannot recall the occasion." It is just possible, though Graves's excellent plain prose has hardly changed throughout his writing lifetime and I would find it difficult to date anything of his by internal evidence, that the piece is a spoof: a lecture he would have liked to give, or would have thought it appropriate to give, in 1928 but has in fact only written recently. He starts by explaining that, for the Fifth of November, he has brought not squibs but barrels of gunpowder. In a lecture to teachers (he notes) one is expected to explain why it is right to admire poets like Yeats, de la Mare, Masefield, Bridges, Hodgson, and Wolfe (a very odd lumping together of poets whose one common characteristic is that they were unlike Eliot and Pound and Herbert Read, whom Graves also mentions, in wide public favour in 1928). He does not admire them any more, chiefly because it seems to him that they write for an "aggregate public without seriousness or truth," where true poetry is written "by serious people for serious people."

Poets who write for the aggregate public are "doing the right thing," which is not a virtue but a vice; "it is really a cowardly attempt to please everyone, the aggregate of disorder before pleasing oneself." Doing the right thing is the equivalent of using a "Party Voice," the "voice of the poor widow welcoming the new district visitor who gives blankets and tracts to the poor widow... Ingratiating and yet self-assertive, nervous, false. A really good person has no party voice, pitches his or her voice just the same, whoever happens to be about. There are few really good people. And still fewer really good poets.... The result of the party voice is literature; what is provided by the lost for the lost; refresh-

ments at an enormous party for an indeterminate number of ill-at-ease guests. . . . Literature is . . . a trades union very jealous of its solidarity. As soon as a man starts writing fairly well, Literature goes after him and ropes him into membership; that is, if his name has not been put up for membership at birth. And it is the worst sort of trades union; it is a trades union with a conservative executive and headquarters in Bloomsbury. And its motto is: 'Write the right thing!' When I read a new author, the first thing I ask myself is: '*Is this literature?*' If I decide that it is, I stop reading." Graves makes it clear that he is not merely dissociating himself from a middlebrow public: the modern poet, like Eliot, Read, or Pound, though he does not write for the "aggregate public," "writes for a specialist public of *littérateurs*, where the disorder is not large and shabby, but mean and arty."

Graves goes on, then, to give a summary of what he thinks about poetry. Poetry is not a science, but an act of faith which can move a mountain, "the huge impossibility of language," at least a short distance. It is not an art, it does not begin even with words, but with certain dumb tugs and tensions in the poet that can be given "a general, not merely a personal, context" by the act of writing. The poet, in writing, is under a spell, which is the spell of the poem "working itself out consciously." In writing prose—and, as perhaps the best writer of plain prose of our time, Graves here speaks with authority—we may vary our diction and our rhythm with the theme, but we are using a "logical phrasing" in which words are used for "their intrinsic value" only. Graves distinguishes between a word's "intrinsic value," by which he seems to mean its range of denotations, and its "intrinsic qualities," in which he would, no doubt, include its sound and shape and range of associations. "In writing poetry . . . not only the intrinsic values but the most remote association of every word, and the qualities and associations of these words in combination, are recognized and given a part in a supra-logical scheme. Moreover, in appreciating the poem, the reader makes the same recognition. Once written a poem can never be translated into any other language. It has its own final meaning."

The poet, therefore, for Graves does not write (whatever that means) *for himself*. By using language at all he postulates at least

an ideal reader, if only as "the figure in the foreground of the picture, put there to give scale." This ideal reader is to be treated with courtesy, "not left guessing at any doubtful signposts." A word in a poem may point in four or five directions, but not one of these should be a dead end. There may be a number of complex poems which have found no reader to understand them fully, "but this is a reflection on public intelligence, not on poetry."

Graves then goes on to condemn two ways of "not writing poetry." One is fantasia, or dream-association poetry (he may have been thinking of Surrealism or of Miss Edith Sitwell) "which gives the mind no greater enlargement than a dream": this remark could be taken as a condemnation of certain extreme types of romanticism, and in fact Graves seems to condemn this kind of poetry by classical standards for being unintelligent, incoherent, and emotionally private. ("Its weaknesses are that it is not self-aware; that its parts do not tally as they should; and that it is not fully removed from the author.") He points out that if one accepts fantasia poetry one's only critical test can be whether it seems wilful and faked up, or genuinely spontaneous. (His strictures would apply to Beatnik poetry, today. I can myself accept some kinds of fantasia poetry, Corso's, for instance, when it does seem spontaneous. I suppose Graves would accept nonsense poetry [he has written some near-nonsense poetry himself] because the nonsense-mood removes the poem from the author, and, in Lewis Carroll for instance, the parts do tally.)

But if the dismissal of fantasia poetry seems anti-romantic, Graves goes on to condemn "the poetry of theory or imitation" which "goes by the name of 'Classicism.'" He derives this from Aristotle, "who, not suspecting the possibility of authentic poetry, could distinguish only between fantasia in verse, and prose common sense in verse. In his *Poetics*, he set himself to envisage a sort of poetry that would be prosaically awake and show no analogy with dreams. This poetry he would weed of all extravagancies and impossibilities, and confine within rational and educative limits." Classical poets, nevertheless, borrow ornaments from fantasia poets. A poem for them is "the vehicle of a prose message, or a display of art." If the test of a fantasia poem is whether it seems spontaneous, the test of a classical poem is whether

"it can be publicly accepted as literature." Graves then makes an interesting distinction between literature and poetry. Literature is cumulative, poetry a number of unrelated events. Literary standards alter every generation or so, and have to be related to the climate of the age. "Poetry has no standards and is independent of history. Nobody becomes an authentic poet until he has learned to like nobody's poems better than his own, yet to be indifferent to the fate of his own as soon as they are out of his way."

It follows from all this that the criticism of poetry has a very negative function, that of proving that certain poems usually accepted as authentic are not authentic. The authentic poem, to the qualified reader, authenticates itself, and the critic is an intruder. The amount of commentary that has been devoted to the subconscious and literary sources of a fantasia poem like *Kubla Khan*, or to the literary and theological sources of a "classical" poem like *Paradise Lost*, is, for Graves, evidence against these poems. His own poems for years were praised by reviewers but never criticised or analysed in any detail. Dr. F. R. Leavis does not, so far as I remember, even mention Graves in *New Bearings in English Poetry*. When I wrote an essay on him in 1947, the editors of the periodical for which I was writing seemed to think my choice of subject odd, and I believe my essay to be a pioneer effort; I gather, however, that Edwin Muir had written a long appreciation of Graves's poetry some time in the late 1920s or early 1930s. I have seen several subsequent appreciative essays, in each of which the critic writes with the air of having made a discovery.

Yet Graves's first volume came out in 1916, and he has been a nationally known poet all his life. Nor, though he has always kept the needs of his ideal reader scrupulously in view, are his poems so simple that they are hardly worth expounding; on the contrary the proper exposition, by a teacher, of a Graves poem is a trickier task than the proper exposition of a more obviously "difficult" poem by, say, Empson. The truth may be that the poems do, as it were, almost instinctively resist the process of generalisation and simplification which is part of all exposition. They will not reduce to a formula.

I thought it a minor triumph, for instance, when in writing an essay on Yeats's "Byzantium" some years ago I hit on the formula that Yeats had a fundamentally antithetical mind, and that he tended to bring the opposite terms of an antithesis into a dramatic clash with each other rather than ever smoothly to resolve them; this, of course, does not "explain" Yeats, but it does give students a clue; I have heard the point put more crudely, that what gives Yeats, in spite of his reactionary politics and his fantastic cosmology, a radical contemporary relevance is his unceasing dramatisation of inner conflict. I can find no such formula for Graves; his own formula, in *The White Goddess*, that he is a Muse poet, inspired solely by love and fear of the Muse, seems to me like a rationalisation, though a brilliant one. True understanding of his poetry demands some examination of his life. And he has himself in *Good-Bye to All That* provided that, just as he has provided very clear statements about what he thinks a poem should be. One reason, indeed, why the sort of immense, intolerably immense, critical apparatus that clutches and strangles Pound and Eliot and Yeats has not yet crept over Graves may be that he has himself in his prose given us what we need, principles, mythology, personal history so far as relevant.

## 9

Alfred Alvarez, in his brilliant little book *The Shaping Spirit*, dismissed Graves in a footnote as a case of shell-shock:

Robert Graves, whose poetry I admire, does not seem to me to have survived the war. For all his debonairness he has remained essentially a war poet. That is, he has created a drawing-room art out of anything but drawing-room feelings. His movements of savagery and tenderness appear like crevasses in a snowfield, unexpected and disconcerting. Lawrence himself summed it up in *Aaron's Rod*: "In this officer, of course, there was a lightness and an appearance of bright diffidence and humor. But underneath it was all the same as in the common men of all combatant nations: the hot, seared burn of unbearable experience, which did not heal or cool, and whose irritation was not to be relieved. The experience gradually cooled on top: but only with a surface crust. The soul did not heal, did not recover."

Alvarez in a sense retracted this in reviewing the *Collected Poems* of 1959: in that review he spoke of Graves as the one truly 'classical' poet of our time, the only living poet whose poems have the terseness and rotundity that we admire, say, in Catullus or Ovid. "Debonairness" and "drawing-room art" seem to me, though I see what Alvarez is getting at, oddly inappropriate terms. As it happens, I do occasionally frequent what Alvarez would call drawing-room society. A flower of that society, an old Etonian friend, an expert on Giorgione, an admirer of Berenson, confessed to me that he found both Graves's poems, and the personality revealed in these poems, desperately unpleasant; he thought the poems might possibly have prevented Graves from going mad, but that was about all that could be said for them. He also related how, in the early days of his marriage to Nancy Nicholson, Graves and his wife used to visit his parents-in-law for afternoon tea; Graves's father-in-law, the painter Sir William Nicholson, would retire into a deep hot bath on his son-in-law's arrival and emerge after his departure. There is another anecdote, probably apocryphal, which I have heard, at second hand, as being related by somebody who visited Graves and Miss Nicholson when they were earning their living by keeping a small village shop in Oxfordshire. The friend had separate conversations with each. Miss Nicholson said, "Robert is very odd," and a good deal later, apropos of nothing: "Do they hang women for murder in this country?" (But I have also heard this question attributed, more aptly, to Miss Laura Riding.) Graves, looking gloomily round the shop, said, "Nancy is very odd . . ." and a good deal later, apropos of nothing: "What are the penalties for arson?"

*Good-Bye to All That* was a far more smashing attack on the conventional proprieties of English life, on what is today called the Establishment, than the novels, say, of John Wain and Kingsley Amis; it created far more real distress, because it was an attack from within. If one were looking for a debonair or a drawing-room manner among writers of Graves's period one might find it, for instance, in the memoirs of Sir Osbert Sitwell, who describes Graves as combining the characteristics of a schoolboy and a schoolmaster. There is a mandarin manner in English letters, combining blandness with oblique malice, which is not Graves's

manner; it is the manner of an aristocrat taking up literature, like Sir Osbert or like Sir Harold Nicolson, or the manner of an intellectual aristocracy, like the Bloomsbury group. Graves's manner is that of the English minor gentry, who make a point both of not putting on airs and of standing no nonsense, a manner which strangers in England often find blunt and direct to the point of rudeness. It is an extremely masculine manner, often sharp and prickly. Graves has a story about how as a baby in his pram he was blessed on Putney Heath by "mad Mr. Swinburne," who in his turn had been blessed as a child by Landor, who in his turn had been blessed by Samuel Johnson. He thinks of this as a kind of apostolic succession: and what Graves, Swinburne, Landor and Johnson have in common, apart from a fine classical scholarship, is a combative nature and a gift for incisive rudeness in conversation and prose. Graves is, of course, without being a snob, proud of being an officer and a gentleman. There is a very revealing sentence in Graves's appreciatively mocking essay on Kipling: "It is the greatest pity that Kipling was never a real soldier, admissible to the highest caste, for Dr. Johnson was near enough to the truth when he wrote that no man has a good opinion of himself who has not been one." He did suffer from shell-shock for perhaps about ten years after the war. His retreat to Majorca in 1928 was partly the laying of that ghost and *Good-Bye to All That* had also helped to lay it. But drawing-room society and the cult of the debonair were part of what he was retreating from.

Graves, in fact, has not preserved in his *Collected Poems* any poems about actual fighting in the First World War. One very beautiful poem which he has preserved is, however, about a wartime leave. He and four close friends, two man-and-woman couples, spend a day picnicking on the moors:

We five looked out over the moor  
At rough hills blurred with haze, and a still sea:  
Our tragic day, bountiful from the first . . .

We were in love: he with her, she with him,  
And I, the youngest one, the odd man out,  
As deep in love with a yet nameless muse . . .

When we hurried down the rocky slope,

A flock of ewes galloping off in terror,  
There shone the waterlilies, yellow and white . . .

The fire on which we boiled our kettle  
We fed with ling and rotten blackthorn root;  
And the coffee tasted memorably of peat . . .

We spoke little, our minds in tune—  
A sigh or laugh would settle any theme;  
The sun so hot it made the rocks quiver.

But when it rolled down level with us,  
Four pairs of eyes sought mine as if appealing  
For a blind-fate-aversive afterword:—

'Do you remember the lily lake?  
We were all there, all five of us in love,  
No one yet killed, widowed or broken-hearted.'

The acceptance of profound sadness, of the desolating effect of the war on so many lives, is not a proof of 'non-survival' or of a soul that 'did not heal, did not recover.' The peculiarly beautiful balance of this poem is seen in the third line of the first unrhymed terzet: the healing balance of "bountiful" against "tragic."

Digressing a little, I would commend this poem as a first-rate example of Graves's tact and taste in diction. A young English critic, Philip Hobsbaum, recently, in what I thought an insolently patronising way, described the world of Graves's poems as a pastoral and ideal world. But the English landscape at its best is a pastoral and ideal landscape, the most beautiful landscape in the world; and decorum in pastoral diction consists of simple precision in alluding to the features of a landscape, not in elaborate description or in breaking objects into sense, which is, I suppose, one of the things imagism set out to do. The diction here seems to me to have an exquisite propriety; the setting of "tragic" against "bountiful": the tact of the choice of the word "memorably": the plain indications of delightful objects, "rocky slope," "the waterlilies, yellow and white," "rotten blackthorn root," "the lily lake": the deliberate heightening (according to Aristotle's rules for the heightening of tragic dialogue) of the tone in the second-last terzet by the splendid coinage "blind-fate-aversive" and the dignifiedly archaic "afterword." In comparison with the taste which Graves shows in diction here—or read, let us say, immedi-

ately after this poem—the ostentatiously clever and unusual diction (to say nothing of the complex of feeling) of one of Eliot's Sweeney poems, say, feels more than a little vulgar. Graves's strength as a poet has always consisted of refined workmanship within a tradition rather than innovation (though every poem is new, or a renewal) calling attention to itself, or (except in some of his wit poems, his "satires and grotesques") in shock tactics.

I said earlier that it was impossible to find a formula for Graves, but the balance of the bountiful and the tragic possibly might be near one. There are a number of strong poems in his middle period in which he sustains himself against the tragic not by acceptance of love's and nature's bounty but by an unhysterical irony. The knowledge of the worst is still there in his latest volume, *More Poems, 1961*: in a poem called *Surgical Ward, Men* (his prostate gland had been removed), he is in terrible pain, but determines not to scream out and bring the charge-nurse

down the aisle  
With morphia-needle levelled....  
Lady Morphia—  
Her scorpion kiss and dark gyrating dreams—  
She in mistrust of whom I dared out-dare,  
Two minutes longer than seemed possible,  
Pain, that unpurposed, matchless elemental  
Stronger than fear or grief, stranger than love.

Let us take "pain," in that extreme sense, as the essence of the tragic, "love" in all its ranges of senses in Graves as the essence of the bountiful, and I think we have at least a useful working clue. Even if love springs from and leads to pain, love's bounty must be accepted with love, with the most humble gratitude:

Dwell on her graciousness, dwell on her smiling,  
Do not forget what flowers  
The great boar trampled down in ivy time.  
Her brow was creamy as the crested wave,  
Her sea-blue eyes were wild  
But nothing promised that is not performed.

What is it that has been promised and must be performed?  
Is it what Graves tells us about in *The White Goddess*?:-

No poet can hope to understand the nature of poetry unless  
he has had a vision of the Naked King crucified to the lopped

oak, and watched the dancers, red-eyed from the acrid smoke of the sacrificial fires, stamping out the measure of the dance, their bodies bent uncouthly forward, with a monotonous chant of: 'Kill! Kill! Kill!' and 'Blood! Blood! Blood!'

Or is it something that happens after death, after much suffering?:-

But they will ask you yet: 'What of your feet?'  
 You shall reply: 'My feet have borne me here  
 Out of the weary wheel, the circling years,  
 To that still, spokeless wheel:—Persephone.  
 Give me to drink!'

Might it not, after all, be truly a promise and not a concealed threat, or the promise mattering more than the threat?:-

She tells her love while half asleep,  
 In the dark hours,  
 With half-words whispered low:  
 As Earth stirs in her winter sleep  
 And puts out grass and flowers  
 Despite the snow,  
 Despite the falling snow.

How right, in a way, Graves is about the intrusiveness of the critic where a poem like that last "perfect short lyric" (one is driven to the trite phrase, because for once it is the fully apt phrase) is concerned. I hope I have shown that Graves's poems (like the words of a poem, in his account of it) open out in several directions and that no direction, for the ideal reader, ought to be a dead end.

It might sum up in the end, I think, that he is one of the few really good love poets in the English language, and also one of the most scholarly craftsmen in English poetry, in his own tradition, the tradition of Skelton, of Wyatt, of Ben Jonson and the Cavalier poets of Ben Jonson's school (he is a little suspicious of Donne), of Landor, of Swinburne, of Hardy. He has suffered in war. He has suffered in two relationships with women, his first wife Nancy Nicholson and Laura Riding, but the suffering also brought great rewards in self-understanding; his later years, with a much younger wife, and young children, have been on the whole gentle years, and though the undertone of sadness is never absent his later love poems are gentler and in a sense happier than his early

ones. The sense of impending doom is still with him; may it impend for many years to come:

Spare him a little longer, Crone,  
For his clean hands and live-submissive heart.

What a real man! And what a true poet!

Philip Larkin

### *Faith Healing*

Slowly the women file to where he stands  
Upright in rimless glasses, silver hair,  
Dark suit, white collar. Stewards tirelessly  
Persuade them onwards to his voice and hands,  
Within whose warm spring rain of loving care  
Each dwells some twenty seconds. *Now dear child,*  
*What's wrong*, the deep American voice demands,  
And, scarcely pausing, goes into a prayer  
Directing God about this eye, that knee.  
Their heads are clasped abruptly; then, exiled

Like losing thoughts, they go in silence; some  
Sheepishly stray, not back into their lives  
Just yet; but some stay stiff, twitching and loud  
With deep hoarse tears, as if a kind of dumb  
And idiot child within them still survives  
To re-awaken at kindness, thinking a voice  
At last calls them alone, that hands have come  
To lift and lighten; and such joy arrives  
Their thick tongues blurt, their eyes squeeze grief, a crowd  
Of huge unheard answers jam and rejoice—

What's wrong! Moustached in flowered frocks they shake:  
By now, all's wrong. In everyone there sleeps  
A sense of life lived according to love.  
To some it means the difference they could make  
By loving others, but across most it sweeps  
As all they might have done had they been loved.  
That nothing cures. An immense slackening ache,  
As when, thawing, the rigid landscape weeps,  
Spreads slowly through them—that, and the voice above  
Saying *Dear child*, and all time has disproved.

Thom Gunn

## IN NOBODY'S PANTHEON

Though critics often mention Robert Graves in passing, they are strangely unwilling to commit themselves to assessing his whole achievement. There are only one or two good accounts of his work for the scores of essays on Pound and Yeats. I am not aware that the study of his poetry is encouraged in any university. And though our poets express their admiration and he seems to be widely read, he is still excluded from all the official Pantheons.

It is not at once easy to see why recognition of him should be so tentative, almost so furtive. His subjects are important enough, aren't they? His style is good enough, isn't it? Maybe one reason for the critical neglect I have mentioned is that neither subjects nor style are eccentric nor difficult. Maybe he should have adopted a technique of fragmentary discourse like Pound, or a private mythology like Yeats, and thus have been able to produce a mass hallucination as they have done. Yet he has never had the inclination; he has always been too interested in the matter of the tangible world to break it up into scarcely recognizable pieces or to subordinate it to a set of arbitrary beliefs.

And his poems are difficult to classify. There are certain identifiable themes running through his work, it is true, but they are fairly familiar, the principal one, perhaps, having to do with the pressures of irrational despair. But how can one sum up the diversity of such poems as *Down, Wanton, Down!*, *The Castle*, *Allie*, *Broken Images*, and *The Mark*? They are all clearly excellent, but it would be hard to reconcile their individual excellences within a general statement.

Confronted with such versatility, the professional critics appear to have taken refuge in the formula that though he is accomplished (they admit that) he is 'minor.' We all know what a minor writer is, he is a writer who is not major: and the application of the term to Graves relegates him securely to the company of such other minor figures as Campion, Jonson, Herbert, and Rochester,

as opposed to the acknowledged major poets like Spenser, Milton, Shelley, and Yeats, who are so major that they require volumes of elucidation.

The suggestion I am trying to make is that somebody's standards are wrong, and that that somebody isn't Graves. As an example of a poem of a minor poet which is itself so minor that it has not yet penetrated the pages of any anthology, we may take his *The Cuirassiers of the Frontier*. It is a poem in which I find an indisputable power, the kind of power that sets it beside the best written this century. Its structure is simple, resting on a contrast between the hard direct energy of the first-generation Romans on the frontier of the disintegrating Empire and the soft confusion of the civilians back in Rome. It is by no means a sentimental contrast; for if the cuirassiers admire vitality and skill, it is the vitality and skill solely of war.

He who among us . . .

Lets drive his heavy arrows, to sink  
Stinging through Persian corslets damascened,  
Then follows with the lance—he has our love.

And the last line, 'A rotten tree lives only in its rind,' contains an image that not only sums up the meaning of the poem, but serves to limit and qualify the value of the cuirassiers, for they are *part of* the rotten tree, and their vitality is admirable principally by contrast with the very rottenness they help to prolong.

The poem shows Graves at his most powerful, and it is practically unknown. Yet it is fitting, in a way, that he should not be quarrelled over like poets of greater pretensions. Unlike major poets, he is concerned not with his own greatness but with writing poems as good as he can make them. And he already has written a body of work which will be discovered by generation after generation of readers as saying something durable about human experience.

Ruth Fainlight

*The Storm*

The storm, like a mad tiger  
Explores the valley now  
And roars from side to side.

His flanks gleam in the light  
Flashing from yellow eyes  
That shatters earth and sky.

First rumblings, far and faint  
Then thunder bursts from that throat  
And plunders sense from my brain.

I feel his hot, searing breath  
Leaving the valley at last  
And grieve for his lonely death;

Striking the trees in his rage  
High and dark in the hills  
He dies like a god old and crazed.

Ruth Fainlight

### *Immortality*

Old men pass between olive trees rooted in blood  
Bending their gnarled spines to stoop for the fallen olives  
With faces as grey and seamed as the grappling trunks.  
But for each of their years, their trees have a decade.

New shoots from the trunk, new fruit, a yearly death—  
In this sense the human generations are more slow.  
A man watches his children grow, his son become himself  
Then follow him. The family blood will see the tree

Fall at last, leaving another one sprung from its side.  
The cycle of time for the trees, rising and falling,  
And the living and dying of men who will tend them  
Are nothing. Still the same olives are gathered each year.



Ruth Fainlight

### *Summer Drums*

The drums of summer throb behind the hills  
While fireworks rise like opening flowers  
Up from the valley, echoed by the sighing crowd.  
The voices and the roses burst against the night.

The heat is black and heavy like the dancer's blouse,  
And coiled within the music and her lifting skirts  
That add their sweet perfume to the musky night,  
A beating of drums sends out the warning that the summer rules.

Donald Davie

## IMPERSONAL AND EMBLEMATIC

After reading through Robert Graves's *Collected Poems* (not the first Graves 'Collected,' nor perhaps the last), I am confirmed in my sense of where his surest achievement lies, though my sense of it is enriched by examples I hadn't noticed. His natural and characteristic form is the epigram. I think of such poems as *Love Without Hope*, *Flying Crooked*, *On Portents*, *Woman and Tree* and (a new one to me) *New Legends*; it seems that this sort of achievement has been possible for Graves at every stage of his career. And it would be easy to elaborate this into a view of Graves as the Landor of his age. Not only the addiction to epigram (in the fullest Greek-Anthology sense, with a special place for the sumptuous love-compliment in this form), but also the self-imposed long exile by the Mediterranean, and the face turned to the public at large (irascible, scornful, self-consciously independent) are things that Graves and Landor have in common. What's more, the difficulty we have in making Landor fit (into his age that is, with Wordsworth and Coleridge, Shelley and Keats) is just the difficulty we have seeing where Graves fits in with Eliot and Pound and Yeats, Auden and Thomas. As historians forget about Landor, so, I suspect, they will try to forget Graves. Each poet seems to be the exception that proves the rule about his time, the case which belies the generalisation but cannot disprove it because the case is so clearly a special one. Yet this last limitation (for that's what it is) is not at all so clear in Graves's case as in Landor's; and that's why the comparison shouldn't be pressed—not because it is 'academic' but because it prejudges the issue.

To begin with, the epigrams are only a small part of Landor's work as a whole, from which moreover they stand apart in a category of their own. And this isn't true of Graves: it is recognis-

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ably the virtues of the epigram which inform much work by Graves that is ampler and more relaxed than the epigram proper. And this means that to do him justice we have either to extend the term 'epigram' to a point where it's meaningless or else find a term more comprehensive. I believe the right term is 'emblem.' This can be applied to a poem like *Vain and Careless*, which develops in very leisurely fashion indeed (such as the strict epigram can never afford) through six quatrains which nevertheless stand to the moral discovery in the final quatrain—'Water will not mix with oil,/Nor vain with careless heart'—in precisely the same relation as the body of an epigram to its pay-off line. The story of the lady so careless she mislaid her child and the man so vain he walked on stilts is an emblematic fable, as *The Glutton* is an emblematic image:

Beyond the Atlas roams a glutton  
 Lusty and sleek, a shameless robber,  
 Sacred to Aethiopian Aphrodite;  
 The aborigines harry it with darts,  
 And its flesh is esteemed, though of a fishy tang  
 Tainting the eater's mouth and lips.

Ourselves once, wandering in mid-wilderness  
 And by despair drawn to this diet,  
 Before the meal was over sat apart  
 Loathing each other's carrion company.

This is the emblem in the form of riddle. (The answer to the riddle seems to be 'Lust.') Graves has been much interested in poetic riddles, and in those bodies of literature (e.g. Celtic poetry, and English and Irish folk-lore) which are especially rich in them. Not many of his own riddles are so easy to solve as *The Glutton*; one of the finest and most extended is also one of the hardest, *Warning to Children*, which I now take to be just about the most ambitious poem Graves has ever written.

It is common, and reasonable, to define 'emblem' by distinguishing it from 'symbol.' And part of the difficulty we have with Graves has to do with his being an emblematic poet in an age when symbol has been most practiced and most highly esteemed. It seems important to insist that the one is not an inferior version of the other; every image in George Herbert, for

instance, is an emblem. One can define the difference by saying that the symbol casts a shadow, where the emblem doesn't; the symbol aims to be suggestive, the emblem to be, even in its guise as riddle, ultimately explicit. Another difference might be that the emblem is made, fabricated, where the symbol is *found*; or rather, since it seems plain that both 'making' and 'finding' are involved in any act of imagination, let us say that the symbol aims to give the effect of having been discovered, where the emblem aims at the effect of having been constructed. This is an important distinction, for it means that part of the impressiveness of the good symbol lies in the place and the circumstances of its finding, whereas with the emblem this isn't true. We think the better of Eliot and Baudelaire for finding their symbols in the unexpected because largely unexplored life of the industrial metropolis; but this is no warrant for thinking worse of Graves because he finds his emblems most often in a rural and agrarian England which has vanished. (It's not here that the label 'Georgian' can be made to stick, but rather on an occasional ponderous whimsey, like "*The General Elliott.*") Who can doubt that the rustic image of *Love Without Hope* was specifically constructed (perhaps out of memory, but perhaps not) to stand as full and explicit counterpart to the abstractions of its title—

Love without hope, as when the young bird-catcher  
Swept off his tall hat to the Squire's own daughter,  
So let the imprisoned larks escape and fly  
Singing about her head, as she rode by.

The fullness and explicitness, the dry sharp unshadowed silhouette, the lack of resonance and overtone—these are the virtues of this emblematic writing; and the air of fabrication, even of contrivance (but not laboured contrivance), the evidence of fore-thought, plan and design—these will displease only the reader who comes to this verse for what it never offered to supply.

Sometimes, it's true, Graves seems not to understand the nature of his own gift. We have implied that the emblem is fitted to deal with those experiences which can be made explicit, whereas the symbol exists to deal with just those experiences which cannot be grasped, which can only be hinted at, seen askance out of the corner of the eye, part of the penumbra which in our mental

life hangs densely about the cleared area of experience which we can formulate. When Graves tries, as he does quite often, to render experiences of nightmare obsession and anxiety, of self-disgust or the fear of madness, his dry and definite technique fails him; and we get the disconcerting effect of a nicely adjusted and chiselled frame about a vaporous centre. The much admired *Nature's Lineaments* seems a case of this, and *Welsh Incident* virtually admits as much. Another example, and an instructive one, is *The Pier-Glass*, a piece which could certainly be spared, bearing as it does every evidence of being very early work. This is almost entirely parasitical on early Tennyson (*Mariana* and *The Lady of Shalott*), and it is interesting chiefly for being so much less 'modern' and 'symbolist,' so much more explicit (on a theme which defies explicitness) than Tennyson was in the last century.

One great advantage of emblematic writing is its impersonality. A poet who deals with symbols, a Mallarmé or an Eliot, has to struggle much harder to cut the umbilical cord between poet and poem, so that the poem will stand free and independent. Of course there are those, like Yeats and his admirers, to whom impersonality seems not worth striving for. They find nothing attractive or valuable in the illusion which other poets seek to create, by which the poem shall seem to be a product of the language, and the poet merely the medium through which the language becomes articulate. For them poetry-making is inevitably a histrionic faculty, and they are quite happy to see poetry as the vehicle of personality. It's worth making this point because of a curious passage in Graves's Foreword where, after pointing out that he has lived and written in many countries, he remarks, 'But somehow these poems have never adopted a foreign accent or colouring; they remain true to the Anglo-Irish poetic tradition into which I was born.' What is this Anglo-Irish tradition? It's true we may think of Father Prout and 'The Groves of Blarney,' the Irish tradition of comic and macaronic verse, when Graves turns the delicious joke of a poem written in the pidgin idiom of a Mallorcan pamphlet for English-speaking tourists. But there isn't enough of this sort of thing for Graves to have had it principally in mind. In view of what we know to be his opinion of Yeats, he can hardly mean that either. And yet, to the English reader (rightly or wrong-

ly) the Anglo-Irish poetic tradition means Yeats first and the rest nowhere. Is there any point in comparing Graves with Yeats?

The comparison could be sustained about as far as the comparison with Landor (*The White Goddess*, for instance is a parallel case to Yeats's source-book, *A Vision*), but in the end it is no more fruitful. Yet the word 'histrionic,' as it comes to mind in relation to Yeats particularly and the Anglo-Irish in general, is worth pondering. Graves has shown himself thoroughly at home in the world of the TV screen and the news-reel cameraman; he is not at all reluctant or maladroit in projecting a public image of himself. And this goes along with a self-regarding element in his own poetry, as in poems about his own name or about his own face in a mirror. This is very Yeatsian. Yet in general it's true that Graves uses other media than poetry in which to project his public image. The poems are impersonal in effect, even when they are on very personal themes. And it is the emblematic style which brings this about, whether the poet intended it or not. The histrionic attitude shows through in some of the early poems, notably the much-anthologized *Rocky Acres*, which I was sorry to see had been chosen by George Hartley for his long-playing disc of Graves reading:

Yet this is my country, beloved by me best,  
The first land that rose from Chaos and the Flood,  
Nursing no valleys for comfort or rest,  
Trampled by no shod hooves, bought with no blood.  
Sempiternal country whose barrows have stood  
Stronghold for demigods when on earth they go,  
Terror for fat burghers on far plains below.

What can the last lines mean except that the poet is himself one of the demigods, poised at the verge of his harsh and craggy kingdom, prepared to harry and pillage bourgeois society? And is this not indeed very like the talk and boastful rant of Yeats in many poems, and of the professional Irishman everywhere? And if Yeats is frequently superior to this, isn't it in so piling on the extravagance as to show that he's not taken in by his own performance, but can ironically recognize blarney even when he speaks it himself? It will be interesting to hear how Graves reads this poem, for his very idiosyncratic reading manner,

flat and casual, seems designed specifically to avoid rant of any kind.

The precautions he takes against rant aren't characteristically ironical; one sees them almost at once when, a few pages after *Rocky Acres*, that poem is as it were rewritten in a much terser mode, as *Angry Samson*:

Are they blind, the lords of Gaza  
In their strong towers,  
Who declare Samson pillow-smothered  
And stripped of his powers?  
  
O stolid Philistines,  
Stare now in amaze  
At my foxes running in your cornfields  
With their tails ablaze,  
  
At swung jaw-bone, at bees swarming  
In the stark lion's hide,  
At these, the gates of well-walled Gaza  
A-clank to my stride.

This isn't an important poem, but it has all the impersonality of the emblem, of a medallion; and it seems that not the poet but the English language wrote it, out of the range of meanings that, for instance, 'Philistine' has taken on between the Authorised Version and Matthew Arnold. A good way to see the de-personalizing virtue of the emblem is to compare *The Reader over my Shoulder* (direct and personal, with accordingly a disastrous thumping of the chest in the last lines) with *The Legs*, which stands beside it and treats the same subject—the poet's attitude to his readers, his public, i.e. his society at large—with completely assured and telling control, only possible after he had objectified it fully, in a contrived fable. Hereabouts in the collection—in Sections II and III—the fine poems come thick and fast: *Full Moon*, *Pure Death*, the incomparable *Sick Love*, *Saint*, *Gardener*, *In Broken Images*, *Flying Crooked*—nearly all of these are emblems. *Flying Crooked* is one such, in which the poet distinguishes himself from other sorts of thinkers, such as logicians; *In Broken Images*, constructed in propositions in couplets, has the same theme, and thus mimics very effectively that very discourse, the logician's, from which it distinguishes itself—and this neatness

attained by other means has just the distancing de-personalising effect of the emblems.

In Section IV there are abundant signs of an enormous bitterness, seldom defined and as seldom mastered: such emblems as *Hell*, or *Nature's Lineaments* or *Ogres and Pygmies* are off-centre, registering an experience they cannot comprehend. This shows up in minutiae like the word 'raffish' in the penultimate line of *Nature's Lineaments*, which would certainly have been another word if the poet hadn't wanted a rhyme for 'fish.' The effect of thin shallowness in these pieces seems the product not of writing that is superficial, insufficiently engaged, but of writing that is engaged in the wrong way, produced out of the jangle of raw nerves not from perturbation of imagination. In *With her Lips Only*, the shallowness shows up in another way, as knowledgeable glibness. In different ways two poems do establish imaginative control over the screaming nerves: there are *Down, Wanton, Down!* and the admirable *Certain Mercies*, and George Hartley takes them both for the disc. He's to be complimented also on choosing *To Evoke Posterity*, a less familiar poem which provides a text to hang in the study of every poet and still more of every poetry-reader.

*To evoke Posterity  
Is to weep on your own grave,  
Ventriloquizing for the unborn.*

Another body of work that hangs together usefully is Section VII, where Graves seems to have herded together most of his poems that can be described as marginalia, witty but trivial pieces like *The Persian Version*, *Apollo of the Physiologists*, and *1805*. These are the graceful trivia with which he now appears every few weeks or so, in the weekly magazines; one wishes one could be sure that editors and readers are as aware as their author is, of how marginal such pieces are to his and poetry's central and exacting concerns.

Donald Davie

*Love & the Times*

A knowledge of history fetches  
Love out of its recesses,  
Mapping its open stretches,  
Its pits for trespassers.

Or it is staked out there,  
For country airs to breathe  
On seed-bed and parterre  
Savour of field and heath.

Strange how we can imagine  
Nothing else, although  
We have no hope for the short run  
That times can turn out so.

Donald Davie

*In Chopin's Garden*

A vine of vapour, storm-wrack  
Wreathing up, heavy with fruit,  
Blackens the skies at their back  
On the old invasion-route.

Masovia bows its birches  
Resignedly. Again  
A rapid army marches  
Eastward over the plain,

And fast now it approaches:  
Turbulence, agonies,  
As the poised musician broaches  
The polonaise, storm from the keys.

See them, ennobled by  
The mass and passage, these  
Faces stained with the sky,  
Fluid and supple as trees.

Alan Sillitoe

## I REMINDED HIM OF MUGGLETON

After a couple of months on Majorca I sent Robert Graves some of my poems, and he wrote back asking me to come over to Deyá one Sunday and have tea. So on the first fine weekend of spring I borrowed a bicycle and pedalled off up the mountain road. Trees in the valley were heavy with lemons and oranges, perfuming the road for much of the way up, and when the last half-dozen loops of it reached the col I was rewarded by a wide horizon of the Balearic Sea. Olive groves and pine trees descended to black giantesque rocks by the shore, holding back a hypnotic gently heaving sheet of blue. When I'd had my fill of it I set off downhill, and went almost to Deyá without pedalling.

The house was easy to find, a grey structure by an elbow of road before the village, built on the proceeds of "Claudius" in the early thirties—when Robert Graves was there with the American poet Laura Riding. I left my bicycle on the garden path, and walked to the back door. It was open, but shielded by a hanging curtain of fine steel chain. No one was in sight. Green shoots showed on the grapevine already, and an assortment of broken toys were strewn around the door: bows and arrows, a dancing shoe, a satchel, and a boy's bicycle leaning against the wall.

"Anybody in?" I called out. The movement of a chair from inside, then footsteps, and two hands parted the chain curtain. Graves stood there, a pair of scissors in one hand and a jug in the other, towering above me—it seemed—so I stepped back to make our different heights less pronounced. He looked quizzical, as if he might have seen me somewhere before and couldn't quite place me.

"Are you Robert Graves?" I asked, breaking the silence. I told him my name, adding that I lived in Soller, and had written to him. He thought for a moment, then said: "I received your letter." He left the jug on the kitchen table, crossed the step

and came outside: "I'm going to pick some lemons for lemonade. It's a hot afternoon; how did you get up from Soller?"

"I came by bike, that one by the path. I'll give you a hand if you like."

"All right." We went into the garden, tugging fruit from trees and filling a straw basket. "Some of your poems are good," he said, still looking at me as if waiting for some sort of recognition. "At least you end them well. So many people get off to a good start, then fizzle out half way through, coming in lamely at the end." He was a big man, with grizzled hair, a broken nose (from boxing, he told me), full lips, a vigorous head; he wore sandals, blue jeans, and a brown open-necked shirt—a well-built middle-aged sixty.

We went into the house, the living-room windows overlooked the sea. I asked if he was busy of a Sunday. He poured two glasses of lemonade and sat at the large table covered with books and papers, signing a limited edition of his poems, a light labour that enabled us to talk through the scratching of his signature. "I'm always busy," he replied. "There are no holidays for a writer, especially when he has a large family."

"I find it impossible to work all the time."

"So did I once, but it became a habit. Then it's not so difficult." I asked where was the rest of the family? "Down at the beach," he said, setting the sheets out around him to dry. I relaxed while questions and answers crossed the table at the lazy rate of Sunday afternoon. I said I found his remarks about my poetry encouraging, but that so far none had been published. "That doesn't matter," he replied. "As long as you keep on writing them." This wasn't the sort of truth I wanted to hear: "I'd still like to see them in print."

"That's no problem if you keep writing."

We talked about the various ways in which Ulysses and Telemachus were said to have died—the theme of one of my poems. "Telemachus," he told me (he was then working on the Greek Myths) "was banned from Ithaca by Odysseus, who had been warned that his son would kill him—but it turned out to be another son, Telegonus. In the end Telemachus married Circe," he smiled. "Wasn't that strange?"

We went outside again, into the soft warm air. A few goat bells sounded lazily among the terraces, and nothing else, silence, solitude, as far down as the sea and even beyond. "What part of England do you come from?"

Nottingham: I hadn't seen it for some time, and the word came like a shock, bringing a sudden clear vision of packed streets and factory chimneys, of tar melting between cobblestones in summer, of riotous public houses on Saturday night.

"I've some pleasant memories of Nottingham," he said, "though I've never actually lived there. When we were poor--after the Great War--I received a cheque for a hundred pounds from a Nottingham manufacturer. It was one Christmas and I'd given the postman my last shilling. The man said in his letter that he didn't think poets should starve, and that he hoped the enclosed would help me. That was generous of him, don't you think? Another time I was to go before a medical reassessment board for my pension, and the railway warrant was made out to Nottingham by mistake. I was so ill by the time I got to my real destination that the pension was kept on! I'm sure Nottingham's a town worth writing about, if you're thinking of doing a novel."

From book to book--walking slowly from the roadway up to the house--we got to *The Long Weekend*, a social history of England between the wars, which he wrote with Alan Hodge. He asked if I knew anything about the Nottingham habit of a girl who, saying a loud goodbye to a boy friend late at night after her parents had gone to bed, slammed the house door with the boy friend still on the inside. Of course I knew about it; I said I felt sure it still went on, as it must in other places though. I remembered this Nottingham habit when I wrote *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*.

Back to the house, a quick exploration on my way up to the lavatory revealed several small bedrooms whose main furniture seemed to be beds and books. The four children were living there at the time. Sitting down over a drink, Graves still signing his poems, he asked me which university I'd been to. "I didn't go to any," I replied. "I left school early."

"So did I," he said, "I left school to go to the War." Poverty was an important topic: "How do you manage to live out here?" he asked. I told him I had a pension: had been invalided from the

Air Force. This led us to Lawrence and *The Mint*. Lawrence, he said, had been kind to poets, and in the twenties gave him a first edition of *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, which he said he had been able to sell for three hundred pounds.

At this point Mrs. Graves came back with three children, and the table was cleared for tea. During the commotion Graves looked at me again and suddenly began sorting through a heap of papers on the windowsill. He took one out and held it up, then passed it to his wife: "Who does this remind you of?" Both thought it reminded them of me, and so did I. It was an engraving of Ludowick Muggleton, an eighteenth-century journeyman-preacher who started the sect of the Muggletonians in the North of England, said to be still flourishing up to fifty years ago. "I knew you reminded me of someone as soon as I saw you," Graves said, pleased with himself for having solved the riddle.

We sat for some time drinking *conac*, a fiery Spanish brandy that later helped me on my way back to Soller—flying around the hairpin bends with more speed than wisdom.

Alan Sillitoe

### *A Dead Man's Grave*

Three sons stand in silence  
A limbo of wind and sunshine  
At their father's grave,  
Thinking of him as the live man  
Not yet cleft in three by blackness.  
But wind and sunshine in their hands  
Fail to penetrate that neutral zone of death  
Not yet conceived by them and crossed  
To reach the real man who went  
A year ago through both.

Three sons stand, saying nothing  
To grassblades bending  
(Headstones grey and white proliferate  
Like a thousand trees cut down to stumps  
In some forest shell-shocked by a life  
Of question and exclamation mark)  
But talk about dead flowers  
From a prior visit, when water in the vase was ice  
On this plateau exposed to collieries  
And gouts of wind—the bailing-out of death's  
Deepest coffers, it was so cold;  
Of how frost to prove the dead were not dead  
Turned the water iron-white  
To swollen muscle garrotting the flowers.  
The vase exploded: a ninepin killed  
By trying its own strength out on itself,  
And showered petals to a dozen graves.

Broad day and spring: three brothers  
Stand in silence, with sunshine back to life  
And bitter ice strength  
Showing what the father lost.

Alan Sillitoe

*The Hanged Man*

A crane-machine stood by the kerb  
Block-and-tackle gibbet swinging high  
Beside an obsolescent lamp  
One of many posted up the street  
Strong, once permanent, still twelve-feet tall  
And now to be uprooted.

The lamp post was a green tree  
A lofty, neanderthal  
Man-god with a head of fire  
A bulb of gas with incandescent memories  
Cool and out for good.

The lamp post was beautiful  
Artistic, upright and exploited  
Fluted trunk and arms the right proportion  
Cross-trees high along the street  
And head uplifted

To light the midnight tracks  
Of wino-boozers weaving late from pubs  
Breathing sweat and well-meant kisses:  
A beanpole for mad cars not to climb up;  
No one ever tried to stare it out,  
It went unnoticed as the moon.

A crowd of children watched  
Supporting pavement-stones extracted from  
The middle of midsummer's day  
As by a helter-skelter at a Goose Fair's October downfall  
The crane arm of the high hook descended  
Like an iron question mark  
Inverted for the lamp post's dead opinion.

A rope well-placed was circus fitted  
By a workman laughing in the cabin  
Pulling his levers like an executioner—  
Until the lamp post still full-vigoured  
Was unscrewed uprooted  
Tugged a few feet off the ground

And lifted high for one last look up the long street:  
Swinging slightly and lop-sided  
A hanged man humiliated  
Was lit in death by sunlight, and sent  
Towards the dark gloom of its extinguished own.

Alan Sillitoe

*Exfiltration*

Men stand fishing by the river bend  
Where sewer outlets prove creation  
With nearby chimneys telescoping:  
Wide hypodermics of the powerstation.

The suburbs stop where pit-shafts sink  
From axles into earth, and grinding wheels  
Play roulette against the sky: dynamoes  
Sing to the drumbeat of hydraulic heels.

Smoke elbows up, and particles  
Of poison fall in atom-order rain,  
In a slow slant over box-encompassed fields  
And woods weeping from theodolite pain.

Poles with marks and numbers, men with lodestone  
Lungs plane-table limb and life-line  
From pasture onto paper, while boots lift  
And plunge to crush an extant celandine.

Surveyors spread triangulation  
And headstocks stare as from creation's dome:  
As clouds pile over pylons sheep and people  
Turn, without opinion, towards home.

Colin Wilson

## SOME NOTES ON GRAVES'S PROSE

I know of only one other modern writer who is as difficult to discuss as Robert Graves—and that one is Henry Miller. Both writers are prolific; both are full of splendid pages; both have a quality of mind which can only be called 'eccentric.' And both are an immense embarrassment if you try to write about them, because their weird mixture of qualities baffles the critical procedure.

I am going to try to be blunt about this—which is not an easy thing for a writer to be about his fellow writers, particularly if he happens to know them. In Miller, you never know what is straight pornography, thrown in for the American tourists in Paris (who pay about five dollars a copy for *Sexus* and *Plexus*) and what is essential to his self-expression. And in Graves, you never know what is the true expression of the Celtic poet, and what has been written with one eye on the best-seller market.

What is worse, you cannot solve the problem simply by asking them. I tried putting the question to Miller one day, and met with an indignant self-defense—a declaration that you cannot treat some of his work as 'essential' and other parts as dispensable pornography.

I also remember the occasion when Graves discomfited a moronic television interviewer on a late night programme. The interviewer—the usual empty headed actor with a big smile and wavy hair—thought he would be brutally direct, and asked Graves: 'I have been told that you consider yourself primarily a poet, but that you write cheap pot-boilers to support yourself and your family. Is this true?' Graves glowered coldly, and retorted: 'Name half a dozen of them.' The interviewer stammered, and hastily changed the subject. And yet, if he had been a little better informed, he might have replied: '*I, Claudius*, *Claudius the God*, *Sergeant Lamb of the Ninth*, *Antigua*, *Penny, Puce*, *Wife to Mr. Milton*' and so on, without raising an eyebrow. Admittedly, only Graves's worst enemy would call a work like *King Jesus* a 'pot-

'boiler'; and yet there is some truth in the remark, for all that.

And yet no one who has read Graves's novels can doubt that he will continue to be read in a hundred years time. Which is to say that, to some extent, Graves can be regarded as a 'classic.' Which is to say that a critic ought to be able to explain what it is about him that makes him a valuable writer. And very few critics can.

There are two other Celtic writers with whom Graves can profitably be compared: W. B. Yeats and John Cowper Powys. (The latter is perhaps not so well known in America as he deserves to be, but his series of novels: *A Glastonbury Romance*, *Porius*, *Wolf Solent*, *Owen Glendower*, will be one day recognised as one of the greatest contributions to the novel in the 20th century.) And immediately, it becomes easier to grasp what is so important about Graves. Like so many Celts, he is incapable of not creating literature; his mind is steeped in the romantic tradition and in the love of antiquity. Unlike so many modern writers, he is never afraid to be subjective. In fact, the problem does not even arise, for he is subjective by instinct. He never has to worry about whether he is creating literature or whether he is too close to the standards and conventions of our society; he does not have to make an obvious effort to transfer himself from the world of money and household worries to the world of 'the poet.' His interest, his centre of gravity, already lies in the world of the poet; unlike so many of his fellow writers—especially in England and America—he has been blessed with total absorption in what he has chosen as his life's work.

It is because Graves is a born writer—because he swims like a fish in his chosen element of literature and the past—that he is also an exasperating and wrong-headed writer. An obvious example—and one no doubt treated elsewhere in this issue—is his attitude towards his contemporaries in his Clark Lectures on poetry. The breezy, aggressive tone of these lectures is refreshing, but they cannot be condoned for that reason alone. His diatribe against Pound remains a curiosity, like Greene's attack on Shakespeare in the *Groatsworth of Wit*, but there was never less attempt at critical fairness to an important poet. Eliot is attacked as a disciple of Pound, a 'Poundling' who rewarded Pound for

blue pencilling *The Waste Land* with the dedication to 'the better craftsman,' and *The Waste Land* itself is dismissed as the first attempt to apply the technique of 'collage' to poetry. More preposterous still, Eliot is attacked as an anti-semitic! Now while it is true that Eliot's early poems contain some unflattering references to Jews (which Eliot has confessed to regretting) no one who knows his work could suppose that hatred of Jews is a part of Eliot's 'vision of life' as it was of Hitler's. This kind of criticism, amusingly subjective, would be altogether delightful if expressed to half a dozen boon-companions over a gallon of Spanish wine; but it has no place in a course of university lectures.

But even more extraordinary is his attack on W. B. Yeats. One might imagine that Graves and Yeats had much in common; they appear to take much the same unsympathetic view of *The Waste Land*, and to prefer a poetry rooted in romance and tradition. But Yeats is also dismissed as a borrower, a plagiarist. (Graves once compared Yeats to a man who goes around gathering fragments of wool from briar hedges to make himself a coat—having, Graves implied, no wool of his own.) Graves tells how Yeats once asked Laura Riding to recommend a young poet for inclusion in his Oxford Book of Modern Verse, and then rejected the poet she suggested; whereupon Graves and Laura Riding also refused to be included in The Oxford Book. Graves's motive for telling this story in the middle of a section on Yeats's poetry is obscure; one might almost think that he wanted to supply a discreditable personal reason for his dislike of Yeats's work.

It is possible, of course, to sympathise with Graves's amusingly malicious attack. I have discovered that most people who met Yeats thought him an amusing old fake. But how can anyone with an ear for poetry read the work of Yeats's last twenty years without being devastated by the terrible sincerity and the intellectual power revealed in it? If Yeats were fifty times a fake and a charlatan in his personal life (I doubt whether he was—shyness assumes strange masks), nothing could invalidate *Under Ben Bulben* and *The Tower*.

Possibly Graves and Yeats were too much alike for real sympathy. Add to this that Yeats was very much the older man, and that he was very much the elder statesman of poetry when Graves

was a struggling writer, and it is easy enough to see why Graves might feel a certain impatience with his great contemporary.<sup>1</sup>

One characteristic he undoubtedly shares with Yeats—the desire to be considered a mine of curious and remote erudition. Amusingly enough, this is the feature of Yeats that he singles out for special rebuke in his lecture. Graves quotes a lengthy passage from some old alchemist of the kind that would have delighted Yeats, making the point that Yeats lacked any real knowledge of alchemy. Then Graves adds carelessly that the alchemists made a solvent for gold called muriatic acid. Apparently he was unaware that muriatic acid is only another name for hydrochloric acid, and that gold can only be dissolved in *aqua regia*, a mixture of nitric and hydrochloric acid.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, the strangest similarity between the two poets emerges when Graves's *White Goddess* is compared with Yeats's *A Vision*. (Graves singles this out for attack in his lecture!) Both these books are weird agglomerates of remote and archaic learning, jumbled up to make a kind of 'system' that bears some resemblance to that of William Blake. Both are fascinating reading, and should be kept as bedside books. And in both cases, the reader is never sure whether the book is serious, or whether it is a gigantic leg-pull. Yeats claimed that his book was dictated to his wife by spirits. Graves openly claims a kind of supernatural second-sight for himself that enables him, among other things, to solve the riddle of the number of the beast in Revelation, 666. If you open Graves's book casually, you are likely to assume that it is a learned and closely argued treatise on Celtic mythology and druidic law. But when you proceed to read it from the beginning, you soon realise

<sup>1</sup>I might add that Graves once accused me of putting too much personal bitterness and malice into *The Outsider*, a remark that has always baffled me. I wonder how far he was again playing the strange trick of reading his own characteristics into someone else's work? I hasten to add that I do not consider Graves in general an envious or malicious man.

<sup>2</sup>I cannot resist adding here that Eliot has constantly reprinted a similar blooper in his essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent*. Explaining the metaphor of a catalyst, he remarks that when oxygen and sulphur dioxide are passed over platinised asbestos, the result is sulphurous acid. In fact, of course, the result is sulphur trioxide gas, which must be dissolved in dilute sulphuric acid to make concentrated sulphuric acid. I suggest that both Eliot and Graves need a short course in chemistry.

that it is about as academic as Nostradamus's dream book. In fact, both Yeats's *Vision* and Graves's *White Goddess* are direct descendants of Madam Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine*; they are attempts by romantic rebels to write a 'sacred book' for the age of machinery. And since the author of a sacred book is necessarily a prophet or visionary, they are also attempts on the part of their authors to claim for themselves the role of priest or mystic lawgiver.

Now in Yeats, there was an interesting contrast between the man who wanted to be wrapped in strange clouds (like Shelley's Ahasuerus) and the clear-minded, clear-sighted Irish intellectual, who wanted everything in clear, rational terms. The mystic Yeats wishes to be accepted as a lawgiver; the rationalist Yeats wants his readers to go away and think for themselves. The mystic Yeats admires Swendenborg, Blake and Madame Blavatsky; the rational Yeats admires Nietzsche, and his fellow Irishmen Swift, Goldsmith, Burke and Shaw. (Yeats's attitude to the latter was confused, among other things, by sexual rivalry, the lady in question being Florence Farr.)

Now there is no such conflict apparent in the work of Graves, and consequently his work does not contain real tension; it is as undividedly romantic as the work of William Morris. Yet all the same, there are interesting contrasts in Graves. The language of the *Claudius* novels is as blunt and unpretentious as Cobbett, and it is hardly conceivable that they could have been written by the author of *The White Goddess*. Unfortunately, this contrast never appears in the same work. So the readers of the *Claudius* novels are aware of Graves as an amusing populariser of history whose chief quality is irreverence.

It is when we come on to the subject of the novels that we become aware of the real problem of Graves's position as a writer. At least three of them—the *Claudius* novels and *Count Belisarius*—are wholly successful. One is tempted to use that old cliché of reviewers and say they are 'compellingly readable.' Another three—the two Sergeant Lamb novels and *Wife to Mr. Milton*—are excellent books that everyone ought to read once; but they are not on quite the same level. One big novel, *King Jesus*, must be accounted a failure, although it has apparently every element to make it a success; its trouble seems to be that Graves tried too

hard, and made it too slow-moving. (I wonder if he was inspired by Mann's Joseph novels; if so, he completely mistook the direction of his own genius.)

The failure of this latter deserves another word. The reader who reads Graves's appendix before he starts the book is absorbed by it. Like *The White Goddess*, this appendix shows wide erudition; but like the *Claudius* novels, it shows the rebel Graves, prepared to devastate his orthodox readers with irreverence. A combination of the two promises a rare masterpiece: impiety armed with classical learning, a fascinating combination, as Anatole France demonstrated. The book itself is a disappointment. Like *Claudius*, it purports to be a translation of an ancient manuscript; but the device is here used somewhat clumsily. Parts of it read no better than Lloyd C. Douglas or any other popular rehash of ancient history. The 'old manuscript' device is not used consistently, and bits of Old Testament prose alternate with passages that might have been written by any member of the Romantic Novelists Association. For the reader who can persevere, the book has its rewards. Graves obviously meant it to be his masterpiece, and it is a huge and impressive structure. In spite of its slow-motion movement and patches of Lady Novelist writing, it is a remarkable book. But it could have been a great novel, and the reader cannot help wondering why it didn't come off. (I should add that there are admirers of Graves who regard the book as his masterpiece.)

This sense of 'not quite making it' somehow applies to all Graves's output as a novelist. I mean that Graves obviously has it in him to produce an important body of work; he is a first rate novelist, on a purely technical level, and he is full of interesting ideas; he could also be described as a mystic. And yet the two sets of qualities never seem to combine. Think of any great novels—*Le Rouge et Le Noir*, *Adolphe*, *The Possessed*, *Anna Karenina*, *Bleak House*, *Swann's Way*—and then think of the *Claudius* novels. Immediately, you become aware that Graves, as a novelist, lacks a dimension of subjectivity, of sincerity. They are pot-boilers; probably the best and most brilliant historical pot-boilers of our time, but still essentially commercial novels. You would keep them on the same shelf as *Kidnapped*, *Micah Clarke*, *King Solomon's Mines*, *Quo Vadis*—but not with Stendhal and Balzac and Dos-

toevsky. All the same, they are, like these other works, classics in their *genre*.

The fact remains that the expert novelist never combines with the Celtic mystic and the classical scholar, and that in the one novel where some kind of an effort is made (*King Jesus*—which contains, for example, some of the theories expounded in *The White Goddess*) the two utterly refuse to unite.

Part of the trouble, I have suggested, is that Graves is not a writer of ideas. The unifying emotion of all his work is his love of classical antiquity. It would almost seem that he has evaded the modern world and turned back to the past; consequently, that he has never reached the phase of 'terrible insight' so characteristic of the later Yeats and of Rilke. This must come through facing and accepting the modern world. It is significant that his only two works dealing with the modern world—the autobiography *Goodbye to All That* and the novel *Antigua, Penny, Puce*—fail to reveal any of that 'sense of his own age' that Eliot considered the first attribute of the major writer. The novel is the only total failure among Graves's novels, while the autobiography, significantly enough, looks back to the 1914 war.

I should add that I do not feel that this criticism applies with the same force to the poetry (and this article is supposed to deal only with the prose). Even so, when I casually open a volume of Graves's poems, I am uncomfortably aware of the number of classical references, and also of a curious 'made' feeling about the poems. I mean that a Graves poem is somehow like an article of hand-made furniture, not like an intensely personal outpouring in a personal, magic language (as, for example, in Rimbaud). This, in itself, is no criticism of Graves; some of the best lyrics of the 20th century have been written in this hard, impersonal language—by Yeats, Synge, Gogarty, M'Diarmid. But although the poetry is undoubtedly Graves's most important work, I cannot feel that it escapes this limitation of the novels—lack of 'a sense of his own age.'

This essay would be incomplete without some comment of the part played by sex in Graves's work. The *Claudius* books were best sellers because their plots were mainly about sex and murder. Probably the fact that they dealt with actual historical events

saved them from being banned as obscene, for they abound in rape, incest and every kind of sexual perversion. (In this, they stay faily close to their models, Tacitus and Suetonius.) Some of his poetry shows this same Elizabethan zest for the sexual. This also emerges in his volumes of *The Greek Myths*, and even in his translations of Suetonius and Apuleius. Bearing this in mind then, it is all the more surprising that sex plays no central part in Graves's work. In his Clark lectures, he quotes with disapproval Yeats's lines:

'You think it horrible that lust and rage  
Should dance attention upon my old age.'

And yet again, Yeats has succeeded, in his later work, in somehow uniting his obsession with sex with the driving force of his poetry, of *personalizing* it so that it adds strength to his work. For Graves, sex, like the modern world, seems to be a subject with which he has never come to terms. It must be either draped with a mantle of classical antiquity, or treated in a jocular, Elizabethan manner, as in the poem *Down, Wanton, Down!*

Some modern writers seem to spawn commentators, so that you could hardly count the number of books on Joyce, Kafka and Eliot in the British Museum. Others, like Graves, are unfairly neglected. (Powys and Henry Williamson are another two examples.) Now, a group of English poets, led by John Wain, Kingsley Amis and Philip Larkin, is beginning to find his work an important inspiration. It is to be hoped that Graves now—in his late sixties—finally gains some of the attention he has long deserved.

Geoffrey Johnson

### *Money*

When lovers quarrel, ho la la,  
We well may laugh, but pity more,  
It is their failure, sol mi fa,  
To have the highest make them sore.

The finest of the finest thing,  
Or none, so runs their proud complaint;  
Perfection missed by a tip of wing  
So makes a devil of a saint—

Yet soon they gather, ho la la,  
Enough of wisdom from their pain  
To find that wounding sol mi fa,  
Best heals with turn and kiss again.

But a family quarrel, loud or glum,  
Is far too deadly to be funny,  
And far too nasty, fie, foh fum,  
When rooted in the muck of money.

A family will's or a family pool's  
Division, apt ironic word,  
So splits a home in murderous schools  
That hell itself seems disinterred.

And now that happens, fum, fie, foh,  
Pack up your traps, once happy man,  
Hoist the Blue Peter, yo ho, ho,  
To anywhere far from kin and clan.

Geoffrey Johnson

### *Eternal Moment*

This garden path of simple gravel and sand  
Turns, as I muse, to brilliant coloured beaches;  
Kaleidoscopic crowds in sunlight shaken  
Flit, settle, dismember; rose-and-gold as peaches  
Three children burn, mirrored in pools, or waken  
With cries of wonderment on every hand.

This garden path of simple gravel and sand  
Gleams, and as soon is lost where human trouble  
Never threw shadow nor ecstasy echo, where  
Eternity smiles hoar mountains down to rubble  
And sifts their hour-glass dust through crystal air.  
In that slow smile all history's comprehended,  
Naples is not yet born and Brighton ended.

And then the path, with rainbows in it spun  
Of dews and powdered quartz, flashes once more,  
A myriad elements, yet a single strand  
Where moment and eternity are woven in one.



Geoffrey Johnson

### *The Letter Not Written*

My thoughts unwritten are as winds that blow  
Too high for rainfall to materialize,  
Then reabsorbed in fluxions of the skies  
Drift elsewhere as a gentle mist or snow.

It may be that some hour when evening sighs  
And flakes or mists evoke the long-ago,  
You will look up in wonder and will know  
That somewhere one who deeply loved you dies.

## BOOK REVIEWS

James Boatwright

### THE SEQUEL TO LOWRY'S *UNDER THE VOLCANO*

Few books receive reviews as peculiar as those which greeted the publication of Malcolm Lowry's *Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place*. Most reviewers neglected the book at hand and concentrated their comment instead upon Lowry's novel of fourteen years ago, *Under the Volcano*. And this is understandable, because never were two books more intimately linked, and without some knowledge of *Under the Volcano*, most readers would probably find *Hear Us O Lord* baffling, if not downright annoying. The initiates, however, were neither baffled nor annoyed; to them, *Hear Us O Lord* was an unexpected gift, unexpected because Malcolm Lowry died in 1957—and a gift because *Hear Us O Lord* is a sequel to what is probably a great novel.

Not that the greatness of *Under the Volcano* is universally recognized. Although critics like R. B. Heilman, Stephen Spender, and Alfred Kazin heaped praise upon it when it was published, it has been almost completely neglected until recently and has led an underground life, remembered by enthusiasts and ignored by practically everyone else. In 1958, however, the novel was reissued by Vintage Books, and in the past two years the winds have shifted. The Library of the University of British Columbia has started a Lowry collection, the *Times Literary Supplement* devoted a leader to Lowry in 1960, and the Spring, 1961 issue of *Canadian Literature* deals with the man and his works (including a bibliography in the Spring and Summer issues).

Why the years of neglect and now the renewed excitement? One of the answers is suggested by Lowry himself, in a preface he wrote for the French edition of the novel (1949; translated and

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*Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place*. By MALCOLM LOWRY.  
J. P. Lippincott Company, 1961.

reprinted in *Canadian Literature*, Spring, 1961). He tells there of an incident that occurred before the original publication of *Under the Volcano*: a publisher's reader complained of the tiresomeness of the opening chapter; he had found "uninteresting the meanings that float on the surface of the narrative." Lowry asks for a re-reading of the book—and perhaps this it what it has had. Perhaps all those readers who were put off by the incredibly complex first chapter but were at the same time teased with the feeling that they might be missing something extraordinary came back and gave it another try. And they were rewarded, surely, with the knowledge of as poetic, tragic, and profound a symbolic novel as the past twenty years have to offer.

It is conceived on a grand scale: the central volume of six or seven volumes which were to be entitled collectively *The Voyage That Never Ends*. It is also (as Lowry points out in the same preface) the first leaf of a triptych, the first book of "a kind of drunken *Divine Comedy*." The time is the Day of the Dead, 1938 and 1939; the place a town in central Mexico; the characters Geoffrey Firmin, his former wife Yvonne, his half-brother Hugh, and an old friend, Jacques Laruelle. But all this (and much more) can be found in Lowry's preface. What is not found there (modesty would forbid) is the declaration that he has pursued things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme (unattempted, possibly, except by Joyce); what is more, the pursuit is almost totally successful.

The novel's central theme is the Faust story, as found in Marlowe's play; Geoffrey, the Consul, is a kind of Faust. But he is also Prometheus and Oedipus, at the mercy of the infernal machine of the gods, as conceived by Cocteau. At one point in the action, Geoffrey picks up and begins reading from a copy of Cocteau's play, thereby pointing up one of the sustained metaphors in the book's structure. Everywhere he turns he is reminded of the phrase and its significance, and when he drunkenly wanders into the town carnival, the ride that he inevitably chooses to take is the *Máquina Infernal*. In a different way this description of the powers of fate and force applies as well to the novel itself. It is an infernal machine (a description of the book actually made by a character in *Hear Us O Lord*), a kind of wheel constructed of scores of moving parts (the images, references, and allusions)—

which runs as smoothly and as effortlessly as any machine composed of mere metal. And as with any complicated machine, it performs various jobs simultaneously.

A good example of the novel's complicated parts and multiple workings is found in the sequence of references to an unimportant Hollywood film. Lowry tells us, through the French film-maker Laruelle, that *Las Manos de Orlac* (or *Mad Love*, as it was known in the United States) is playing at the local cinema and that it was also playing there a year ago, on the day of the novel's tragic action. Laurelle reflects on his early days with Wiene, who directed an earlier, German version of *Orlac's Hände*. This in turn reminds him of the story itself:

Yet what a complicated endless tale it seemed to tell, of tyranny and sanctuary, that poster looming above him now, showing the murderer Orlac! An artist with a murderer's hands; that was the ticket, the hieroglyph of the times. For really it was Germany itself that, in the gruesome degradation of a bad cartoon, stood over him.

Advertisements for the film are pasted all over town, and each character sees them, including Hugh, who describes the film to Yvonne:

It's all about a pianist who has a sense of guilt because he thinks his hands are a murderer's or something and keeps washing the blood off them. Perhaps they really are a murderer's but I forget.

Later in the day Hugh, who years before had been a professional guitarist but is now a journalist intent on helping the Spanish Loyalists, thinks of his own past: "Once the worst possible thing that could befall me seemed some hand injury." What Lowry does not tell us is that the chief characters in *Las Manos de Orlac* are a scientist and a pianist, both in love with the heroine, whose name is Yvonne (Hugh and Geoffrey are in love with Yvonne); that at the end of the film the scientist is dead and Yvonne is threatened by the murderer's hands, which the scientist had substituted for the pianist's hands, maimed in an accident (Geoffrey and Yvonne die violently; Hugh presumably sails for Spain with a secret shipment of arms for the Loyalists). All of the major themes of the book are suggested in this one example: the con-

flict of large and terrible political forces; the conflict between those who feel guilty and want to do good deeds and those who insist that action is meaningless; the literal conflict between Hugh and Geoffrey for Yvonne's love; and the struggle that overshadows all else, the struggle within Geoffrey, the "dark magician" who plans a "great work on 'Secret Knowledge'" but who has abused his magic powers and lost the will to live.

This is only one of numerous series of images, signs, songs, myths and snatches of conversation which reverberate throughout the novel and give it its enormous life and energy. Everything is there but nothing is wasted; the echoes and images build and shift so rapidly that the reader comes to feel that he is in a chamber of mirrors, reflecting and re-reflecting endlessly—which is of course the point. Geoffrey is the victim of his memory and of his consciousness, which are the sources of the echoes and images, and they eventually drive him to destruction. He is unable to shed his past, to seek salvation.

Paradise is offered to him by Yvonne. They will go north, to Canada, to an island Geoffrey owns. But Geoffrey, like Faust, no longer believes in salvation, and he rushes headlong to the cantina where "life... reached bottom," a cantina called the Farolito (the lighthouse). Here, in a horrifying scene, he is mistaken for his half-brother, the leftist, by the *sinarquistas*, the fascists; he is shot and thrown into the barranca, the abyss that defines the physical landscape and symbolizes the hopeless end of man and his world.

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*Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place* is clearly a foreshadowing, as the publisher's note suggests, of several of the books which were to have formed *The Voyage That Never Ends*. What precise place these books would have had in the "drunken *Divine Comedy*" is less clear, but there are clues. Of the seven narratives of varying quality which make up the collection, two short novels stand out: "Through the Panama" and "The Forest Path to the Spring." The main characters in both are a loving husband and wife, unnamed in "The Forest Path to the Spring" and called Sigbjorn and Primrose Wilderness in "Through the Panama" (and in several of the shorter stories). The

husband is the narrator in both stories and would seem to be the same in both, although he is given different pasts. Significantly, the pasts are those of Geoffrey and of Hugh—writer, jazz musician, seaman, prodigious drinker—and just as Geoffrey and Hugh frequently appear to be a kind of double man (Hugh even refers once to Geoffrey as his "ghostly other self," recalling Conrad's *The Secret Sharer*), so Sigbjorn and the unnamed narrator of "The Forest Path to the Spring" and the characters from some of the other stories (Sigurd Storlesen, Kennish Drumgold Cosnahan) tend to become a many-sided self. The obvious and important difference between these stories and *Under the Volcano* is the change in spirit. They often exhibit the same stylistic brilliance and flexibility, the same techniques of allusion and esoteric reference (frequently to conversations, characters, and images in *Under the Volcano*), the same intensity of feeling—but the final and utter despair of the earlier book is gone. One has moved from the first leaf in the triptych, the inferno, to the second and third leaves, to purgatory and paradise.

"Through the Panama," which might have been the nucleus for the book of purgatory, is a tour de force, the journal that Wilderness keeps on the voyage from Canada to England. Wilderness is tormented from within and without: from within by his sense of doom, which he shares with Martin, the main character of the novel he is writing. Wilderness/Martin (they become inseparably tangled) feels doomed because of his burden, the "insatiable albatross of self," and he wishes for a return of "love of life." From without he is subjected to a violent storm in mid-Atlantic, a storm that makes him fear for his and Primrose's lives. At the height of the storm

Martin swore that if he survived he would never willingly do another injurious action, or a generous one for an ulterior motive, unless that were an unselfish one. But the thing to do was *not to forget this*. . . . God give me, he asks, a chance to be truly charitable. Let me know what it is You want me to do . . .

This affirmation of the sacredness of life leads to the promise of salvation, and the story ends with a final gloss from *The Ancient Mariner*: "And the ancient Mariner beheldeth his native country."

This crude oversimplification of what is actually a complex and totally convincing story should suggest, however, the end towards which Lowry is working. This end is reached in "The Forest Path to the Spring," the final scene of which, according to the publisher, was to have been the final scene of the whole sequence of novels. The story is an idyll of the narrator's life on the coast of British Columbia, an idyll into which reminders of the corrupt urban world of the present and the sinister world of the past occasionally intrude (the narrator remembers that the Cascades which he sees are a part of the "great Cordilleras that ribbed the continent from Alaska to Cape Horn—and of which Mount Hood was no less a part than Popocatepetl"). But their intrusions cannot violate the integrity of the life that the narrator and his wife have found; this life brings him to understand

that as a man I have become tyrannized by the past, and . . . it was my duty to transcend it in the present. . . . And to do this . . . it was necessary to face that past as far as possible without fear. Ah yes, and it was that, that I had begun to do here. And if I had not done so, how could we have been happy as we now are happy?

The peace that he has won is reflected in the simpler, less fevered prose and in the loving, detailed description of sea and landscape. The narrator's feelings are ineluctably bound up in the movement of the sea, in the changes of the days and nights and of the seasons. It is essentially a form of paradise regained, a return to the beneficent garden, the possibility of which was so emphatically and tragically denied by Geoffrey in *Under the Volcano*. The movement has been that of gradual illumination, of a tortuous ascent—from the deadly path in the dark wood under the volcano to the forest path that leads to the spring.

Fitzgerald Flournoy

## THE PROBLEM OF TRAGEDY CONTINUES

George Steiner, Rhodes Scholar, winner of the Chancellor's Essay Prize at Oxford, contributor to the more knowing magazines, and author, in 1959, of a first book, *Tolstoy or Dostoievsky*, has, at the age of thirty-two, taken all serious drama to be his province. His book, *The Death of Tragedy*, exhibits a formidable breadth of reading and proposes and defends a suggestive theory, to wit: There have been in the world three great mythologies, the Greek, the Judaeo-Christian, and the Marxian. Tragedy is the product of the Greek mythology, in which there was no remission of sins, no Heaven for the righting of wrongs, no balm in Gilead. In the Christian and Marxian mythologies, both closely related to Judaism, there are remission of sins, reward for the righteous, and, above all, a future Paradise with which the sufferings of this present time are not worth to be compared. Tragedy therefore cannot, in its purity, come out of either. Job in the end is twice as rich as before; Lazarus, the former beggar, lies in Abraham's bosom; the good Marxian sacrifices cheerfully in the present because he looks forward to an earthly Paradise when the state shall have withered on the vine. But Oedipus recovers neither his eyes nor his kingdom, and for him there is no Heaven.

In Elizabethan England, the influence of the Greek classics was still powerful enough for real tragedy to exist. Almost the last words of Lear pose the unappeasable tragic question. As he looks at the dead body of Cordelia, he asks:

"Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,  
And thou no breath at all?"

Racine was the last genuine master of tragedy. The classic mythology was already growing *passé* when he used it to create the tragic figure of Phèdre, irrevocably doomed by a fever in her blood.

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*The Death of Tragedy.* By GEORGE STEINER. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1961.

The seventeenth century is the dividing line. Dryden, at the end of it, hesitated between the neo-classical and the Shakespearian models and barely got his nose inside the sacred portal of tragedy. Goethe's *Faust* is too optimistic to be tragic. It is Marlowe's Faustus, damned without remission or hope because he no longer can repent, who is the tragic figure; for there was, indeed, in the Christian "mythology," especially when the influence of Calvin was potent, a concept of original sin and of the possibility of the soul being taken over by evil beyond recall that was stern as the will of the Gods in *Oedipus*, though it was more just and more logical.

It was the rise of the Romantic and revolutionary spirit in the eighteenth century that utterly doomed tragedy. Rousseau, the prophet of Romanticism, rejected original sin in favor of original innocence and of the theory, still so popular, that all human wickedness and weakness are the results of environment. The pathetic search of the Romantics and the revolutionaries for an earthly Paradise followed. Evil and sorrow could not, for them, have hopeless permanence. For them there was remission of sins on earth. Overthrow the kings, reorganize society, make men free of the laws and conventions that pervert them, and their natural goodness will assert itself and bring their natural happiness in its train. Therefore the repeated efforts of the Romantics and of their spiritual descendants, the Victorians, to write tragedy ended in failure. Shelley, Wordsworth, Keats, Tennyson, and Browning wrote both plays for the stage and dramatic poems for the study, but, of them all, it was Byron, in *Manfred* and *Cain*, who came nearest to achieving tragic stature, for *Manfred* and *Cain* are without hope, branded by the evil that is inherent in them and in the universe. It may not be beside the point to note that Byron had a Calvinistic rearing, which he never entirely outgrew.

At the same period, two other forces united to kill tragedy. The dominance of the middle class and eventually of the proletariat destroyed the *milieu* of court and castle through which Tragedy had been wont to trail her gorgeous pall; and the rise of scientific materialism covered all mythologies with contempt.

Then, out of the Romantic-revolutionary period, by industrialism and scientific materialism, arose the portent of Marx with his

new but optimistic mythology. For a communist to be pessimistic is treason to the state and the faith.

The replacement of narrative poetry by the novel, the rise of prose as an art-form, and the fall of verse to the level of a private and coterie art completed the debacle.

Because of all these things, tragedy in modern times is dead. So says Steiner.

It is true that the critic has to dispose of some formidable figures and some portentously serious dramas. He does so with a cavalier and sweeping jauntiness that is more exhilarating than convincing. Ibsen's *Ghosts* is a "tract. . . founded on the belief that society can move toward a sane, adult conception of sexual life." Strindberg's world is too "hysterical and fragmentary." Chekhov looked upon his plays as comedies. Shaw's only approach to tragedy, *St. Joan*, is too optimistic. Yeats and Eliot did right to reject the brummagem cult of realism, and Yeats nearly solved the problem of a modern style for tragedy, but his plays are brief and slight. Eliot's *The Family Reunion* is written in "flaccid verse," and the appearance of the Greek Furies on a modern stage is absurd.

As for other modern employers of the classical myths:

1. "Gide made of [Oedipus] a petulant little man who arrives at the extra-ordinary insight that his marriage to Jocasta was evil because it drew him back to his childhood."
2. "Cocteau ascends to the pinnacle of bad taste. *La Machine Infernale* closes in the bridal chamber. Oedipus lies sleeping on his nuptial bed . . . while the noble lady daubs cold cream on her face in a frenzied attempt to make herself look younger and more desirable. Under such blunt hammers the nobility of the action crumbles."
3. "O'Neill commits inner vandalism by sheer inadequacy of style. In the morass of his language the high griefs of the house of Atreus dwindle to a case of adultery and murder in some provincial rathole."

As for Maxwell Anderson, his "costume tragedies . . . are written in a style never spoken by any living creature . . . They belong to the dust and tinsel world of the Victorian charade."

This kind of free-swinging critique has somewhat the same zest as knocking a baseball out of the lot, a golf ball for three hundred yards, or an enemy for a loop; but it will hardly satisfy the judicious.

If syphilis and unsuitable marriage should become as nearly obsolete as the code of the blood-feud in Hamlet, would Mrs. Alving, a great woman crushed by fate and her own error, cease to move us to pity and fear?

Are the last words of Shaw's St. Joan too optimistic? "O, God, that madest this beautiful world, when will it be ready to receive thy saints? How long, O Lord, how long?"

We have never thought that *Mourning Becomes Electra* was O'Neill's greatest play, but is the poetry that persists in breaking through O'Neill's sometimes inarticulate prose therefore to be described as "sheer inadequacy of style" or a "morass of . . . language"?

Does Anderson's *Winterset* belong to "the dust and tinsel world of Victorian charade"?

This is a brilliant and learned book which any lover of the drama can read with profit, but it tries to prove too much. When a scholar and a critic (and Steiner is both) finds it necessary to chop off the extremities of Ibsen, Shaw, O'Neill and Anderson in order to fit them into the bed of his theory, one feels that he ought to have taken a lesson from the fate of Procrustes.

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

W. H. AUDEN's latest volume of verse is *Homage to Clio*.

JAMES BOATWRIGHT, originally from Georgia, is a member of the English Department of Washington and Lee.

DONALD DAVIE, of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, is no newcomer to the pages of *Shenandoah*. Wesleyan University Press has just published his *New Selected Poems*.

D. J. ENRIGHT, one of the brightest luminaries in the current poetic firmament, is Johore Professor of English in the University of Malaya in Singapore.

RUTH FAINLIGHT, an American poet married to Alan Sillitoe, knew Robert Graves when she and her husband lived in Majorca. Her verse has appeared in numerous British and American periodicals, and has recently been collected in a volume called *A Forecast, A Fable*.

FITZGERALD FLOURNOY, a specialist in drama, is Professor of English at Washington and Lee.

G. S. FRASER, one of England's leading poet-critics, is the author of such first-rate works as *The Modern Writer and His World*, *Vision and Rhetoric*, and—most recently—a study of Ezra Pound for the Writers and Critics series.

THOM GUNN, a young English poet now teaching at the University of California at Berkeley, is author of *My Sad Captains*, a volume of verse just published by the University of Chicago Press.

GEOFFREY HILL, another prominent member of the younger poetic generation in England, is the author of a collection entitled *For the Unfallen*.

GEOFFREY JOHNSON, a resident of Dorset, is published frequently by leading periodicals and anthologies in England and America.

PHILIP LARKIN, Librarian at the University of Hull, has somehow been able to take enough time from his official duties to become one of England's most important young poets. Much of his work to date has been published in *The Less Deceived*.

ALAN SILLITOE, author of the highly successful novel, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, and a collection of short stories, *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner*, is also a poet of distinction.

COLIN WILSON, England's foremost professional polemicist and *enfant terrible*, continues in his essays and fiction to poke at the hornet's nests he first swatted some years ago in *The Outsider*.

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Dr. Leyburn is George Washington Professor of Sociology in Washington and Lee University.

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